

The Queen's Honor Guard

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Summary: A generation before MK1, the Mandalorians are under the rule of an evil tyrant. When they finally free themselves, they find only that benevolent rule isn't enough to keep them safe. Prequel to Bondage. AUcrossover. Complete.

1. Prelude: Dawn

The Queen's Honor Guard

>by Nyohah<p>

Prelude:

>Dawn

>Thirty-Six Years Before MKI<p>

* * *

><p>A piercing scream echoed through the dark house. Then, as suddenly as the person had cried out, her shriek of pure terror was silenced.<p>

"Mama?" whispered a ten-year-old boy, sitting up in his bed. Cautiously and silently, he lit a candle, slipping out of bed. He crept toward his parents' bedroom, the apparent source of the clashing noises he had heard since he had been awakened by his mother's cry. Unsure of what he would find, the small boy peeked around the doorjamb.

The first thing he noticed was his father fighting for his life. His opponent was a most imposing figure, dressed completely in black and nearly twice the size of the boy's father. It had to be a ninja. Their swords rang, further disturbing the normal midnight calm. The boy searched the room, finding two others looting through his mother's jewelry, but that was not the only thing he saw.

His mother was lying dead in a pool of her own blood, her throat slit, a dagger protruding from her chest. The child glanced away from

his mother's body in shock, only to see his father disarmed and struck down by the tall ninja. Dropping his candle in fright, the boy ran, sobbing, down the hallway to the back door.

The elder of the other two ninjas heard the noise and dashed into the hallway. He cursed as he beat out the beginnings of a fire on the rug and alerted his companion. "Their son! Tempest, don't let him get away!"

The other low-ranking ninja ran down the hallway chasing after the boy. Vendetta followed as soon as the fire was out.

Inside the parents' bedroom, the head ninja flipped a medallion onto the fallen man's chest. The small crescent and its characters glittered in the moonlight. Rebel Silencers, it declared, two words that struck fear into the hearts of all not strictly loyal to the emperor.

Outside, the boy struggled to run faster, farther away from the ninjas, heading for his neighbor's house. He never had a chance. Two strong hands grabbed him from behind and lifted him up, as Tempest carried him, kicking and screaming, to the ninjas' horses. They bound his hands and feet, gagging and blindfolding him, before they threw him over the front of Vendetta's horse.

"Be still, child," commanded the head ninja.

Three black shapes rode off into the night.

* * *

><p>"Be still, child," ordered the nanny. "How am I to braid your hair when you are dancing in your seat?"<p>

Ming sullenly slumped down into her seat. How could they expect her to stand these incredibly long dressing routines when she could be outside romping about in the sweet smelling grass of the gardens? "Why are you taking so long?" she griped. "Can't I go yet?"

"Be patient. I could have been done five minutes ago if you would just be still. Your father is coming home today, from fighting the rebels, so you must look extra-special. There will be no running outside today, princess." The nanny gave one last tug to Ming's hair. "There. All finished. Now turn around, look at yourself in the mirror."

Ming glanced at herself and stuck out her tongue at the image of the dainty little lady, an image that completely clashed with her nature. She was wearing a lavender dress that was far too frilly, matching shoes that were far too hard to walk in, and her hair was braided in a far too elaborate design. "Why doesn't Jer Rod have to do this?" she complained.

"Jer Rod is not a girl. Now come on, out the door. No skipping! You're a lady. You should be very graceful."

Contrarily, Ming tore her hand away from the nanny's and darted out the door. The nanny called after her. "Do you want me to be killed for your insolent behavior? Ming!"

The petite girl ran down the hallway, kicking off her shoes and ignoring the protests of her nanny far behind her. She ran out the door, heading for a place she'd always wanted to go. She watched a section of the beach out her window almost constantly, whenever the army practiced, for it was their training field. Secretly, she practiced the things they did, as best as she could see, as her nursery was a few stories up from the beach. She was to move to her suite upstairs as soon as she turned ten, in a little over half a year, and while she would not miss her nanny one bit, she would miss watching the training sessions. While her suite was in the same tower as her nursery, it was many more stories up, and the guards would look like small insects from that height.

She halted at the water's edge and plopped down on the coastline, burying her bare toes in the wet sand and inhaling the salty scent of the sea. The sun began to rise behind her, wrapping the marble palace in a warm orange aura.

The area was deserted, the trainees having finished their morning exercises, were now preparing for the emperor's arrival. Desereted, except for one small dark spot, quite a distance from Ming. There were no rocks on this beach. Intrigued, she stood and raced toward the figure, leaving indentations in the white, nearly silver, sand.

* * *

><p>The horses raced down the beach, leaving indentations in the white, nearly silver, sand. Having reached their midpoint, three hours into the trip, the ninjas finally stopped. They dismounted their horses, setting the trembling boy on the ground, and removing his gag and blindfold.</p>

The sun's glow was beginning to creep over the trees of the distant rainforest, reflecting on the sand of the beach and the gentle waves of the ocean. For the first time, the boy viewed his captors in enough light to take in the details. The three ninjas were dressed entirely in black. Between their strangely designed hoods and masks, and the two-toed boots they wore, the boy thought that they looked like some kind of alien beast, maybe a little like the raptors, from the planet Chiss, he had heard about at school. But when the head ninja removed his mask, the boy was amazed to see that he had a perfectly normal Mandalorian face, not at all like the monsters his mother had threatened would snatch him out of his bed one night if he misbehaved too much. A perfectly normal face, except for the cruel, sadistic smile it held.

The ninja who had killed the boy's father looked down at him. "Be aware, child, that I am not only the leader of the entire Lin Kuei clan of enforcers," he said without preamble, "I am also Emperor Yuen, ruler and creator of this entire Empire the you live in. And I am a man that you do not want on your bad side, as you parents have just discovered."

"W-what do you want with m-me, sir?" asked the boy, nearly crying from fright after witnessing his parents deaths and being kidnapped and threatened by a person whose arm weighed more than he did.

"Your name will suffice for now."

"Hua Quy Ling, sir."

"Hua Quy Ling, you must be wondering why you are not dead. You should have been properly disposed of hours ago. Except that I sense your exceptional talent with your element, therefore you shall be my servant. As of now, you are not yet old enough to become a Lin Kuei ninja like Tempest and Vendetta, but that will change in a year or so." Yuen gestured to the others and quickly remounted his horse, yet again.

Tempest pulled the boy up behind him, feeling pity. He had joined the Lin Kuei three years ago, thinking that they were honorable warriors. He had lived clear out on Opal Coast, far away from the capital of Silver Coast, or even where the rebellion had been taking place--"Amethyst Coast. Becoming a ninja had been Tempest's plan to bring recognition, wealth, and honor to his farm family. But when he'd arrived, he had discovered that the emperor was not an honorable leader, but a vicious mercenary. Tempest really wasn't that much older than Quy Ling was. There wasn't even ten years between them. He wished the boy hadn't gone through everything he had, especially not in one night.

The ninjas rode off again, pounding hooves breaking the calm morning silence.

* * *

><p>Li Wei Yong sat on the beach, his sniffling breaking the calm morning silence.</p>

"Hello," came a girl's voice out of nowhere. "Have you been crying?"

The boy started, and despite the fact that her tone conveyed only curiosity and compassion, not the scorn his father's would have, he tried to cover up the evidence of his crying. "No." Wei Yong turned and looked at her. She was much shorter than he, some of the frills of her purple dress were torn, her hair looked as though it hadn't been combed in months, her feet were bare, and her entire body was covered with sand.

"You looked like you were crying. And you sounded like you were crying. Are you sure you weren't?"

"I wasn't crying."

The girl crouched down next to him. "Why were you crying?" she asked, as though she had never heard his protest.

"I wasn't crying!" The boy turned away from and discreetly wiped his eyes. He tried to ignore the girl, hoping she would leave. He sat, unmoving, for several minutes, before he turned to see if she was still there.

She sat in the sand, oblivious to the ruining of her silk dress, drawing in the sand with a small stick.

"Do you want to know why I was crying?"

She drew a very large circle in the sand before looking up at him.

"Oh, you're still here. I thought you had gone." Not even acknowledging that she had won, the child searched through the sand near her, picking out five smooth stones and five shells. "Do you want to play?"

"My father expects too much of me."

"That's nothing to cry about. My father doesn't even love me." The girl placed the stones on Wei Yong's side of the circle, and the shells on hers. "You can go first."

"My father's General Li. He thinks I should be better than his other students even though they're older. It's not fair!"

"Nothing's fair. My father makes me dress up and doesn't let me run or do anything unladylike. I just have to see there and be pretty, like a decoration."

The girl didn't sound sad, or upset. She stated these things as unemotionally as if she was stating the amount of Hithron imported from Edenia. Wei Yong looked at the girl incredulously. "Aren't you mad?"

"Aren't you going to play?" She tapped her tiny foot on the ground impatiently.

"What's your name?"

"Princess Yuen Ming!" came a screech, not from the girl. The boy turned to the palace. A very disgruntled looking woman ran toward them. "What do you think you're doing? Now I have to clean and dress you again." The woman unceremoniously hauled the dirty girl to her feet.

* * *

><p>Hua Quy Ling slid off Tempest's horse; his foot caught in the stirrup and he fell. Vendetta unceremoniously hauled him to his feet. Quy stared at the gargantuan structure in front of him in awe.<p>

"Isn't it amazing?" whispered Tempest. "I must have had the exact same expression on my face the first time I saw it. Can you believe it's completely made out of marble?"

Quy shook his head in response to the assassin's question, not taking his eyes off the palace for even a split second.

The four marched through the open wooden doors, held by two male slaves, their heads bowed in reverence to their ruler. A huge group of servants was gathered in the grand hall by the entrance to the palace. They were all kneeled down, bending over so their faces almost touched the floor. In front of all the servants were three people who were not kneeling. One was an ancient-looking woman. The other two were a small boy and girl, who looked to be twins, and were maybe even a year younger than Quy Ling was. They were dressed in very nice clothing, and the girl's shining ebony hair was elaborately done, though it looked slightly damp. As the emperor approached them, the children swiftly bowed in unison.

"Hua Quy Ling," said Yuen, gesturing for him to come forward, "this is my great-grandmother, Yuen Po, the eldest Mandalorian in the entire palace, and my children, Jer Rod, and Ming."

Emperor Yuen turned to the congregation and shouted, "Ning Sa! Where are you?" A petite woman dressed in white stood up and ran to the emperor, keeping her head bowed the entire time.

"Take this boy to the slave's quarters and get him outfitted with some clothing. Begin training him in the garden outside of slave quarters."

* * *

><p>In the garden outside of slave quarters, the little slave girl called Kei Sa cried.</p>

She should have been happy. Out of the hundreds of slave girls, she was one of the only five who were being considered for the role of Princess Yuen Ming's handmaiden. But her mother had just been 'disposed of' and Kei Sa couldn't care less about the princess.

She was still crying when an older slave named Lyn Sa ran by. Unlike most female slaves, Lyn Sa wore loose pants under her kimono top, the type of pants that appeared to be skirts when one stood still. She was tall and lanky, very little fat left on her body due to poor feeding and constant running. She was going very fast, carrying a message to the cook, and she overshot Kei Sa by a few yards before backtracking, a worried expression on her face.

"What are you still doing here?" She reached down and dragged Kei Sa to her feet. "You are supposed to be in the test at this very moment!" She picked up the smaller girl. "And you've smudged your face with your tears, and you've dirtied your hands, and your dress is dusty, and your hair is crooked. What are we going to do with you?"

Lyn Sa sprinted to the nearest well, washing Kei Sa's hands and face as fast as was mortally possible. She brushed off the nine-year-old's dress, then picked her up again. Running swiftly, as any messenger could, Lyn Sa carried Kei Sa to the doorway in front of the auditorium. She stopped just in front of the door, setting the girl down and straightening her hair. "Remember all you've learned. Make your mother proud." The elder girl departed with a quick hug, needing to get her message to the cook and the cook's acknowledgement of the request back to General Li before very much more time had passed, so that she might not be punished as badly.

Kei Sa took one deep breath, gathering her confidence, and strode into the room, using the smooth gait her mother had taught her. Nearly floating along, she saw the envy on the other girl's faces. She stepped up to the emperor, dropping to her knees and leaning over, nearly touched her forehead to the ground.

"Why are you late?" growled Yuen. "Get up." Kei Sa rose to meet an open-handed slap to the face. The envy on the other four's faces disappeared.

Without a sound, Kei Sa stood again and joined the other girls in their perfect line.

Most of the tests consisted of simple knowledge of how the princess, or any lady, should behave. All five girls excelled at the tests, though anything that involved physical coordination, Kei Sa did better. She even painted the elder slave girl's face more quickly and covered it more evenly with the white makeup. But even doing her best at these things, she was still behind for being late.

The final step of the testing process was not at all related to anything ladylike. "If somehow the princess is ambushed when she is without a bodyguard," explained Yuen, "someone must hold off the attacker until help can arrive. Since the handmaiden is going to always be with her anyway, she might as well be able to protect herself and the queen. But women are not allowed to learn to fight, so the handmaiden must be proficient in using her element."

The girls were lined up in the order that they arrived; therefore, Kei Sa would be last. She was extremely nervous. Her mother had tested her so many times in preparation for this test, trying to find her element. She had never succeeded.

The goal of this last test was to somehow raise a small ball Yuen placed on the ground in front of them. Water elementals could create a fountain to support it; Wind elementals could propel it upward. Earth elementals could create a pile of soil to keep it off the ground. And while there was no way a Fire elemental could succeed, Emperor Yuen didn't mind because he didn't really want one to be his daughter's handmaiden. They were completely unreliable and angered far too easily.

The first girl was Wind, and managed to raise the ball a couple of centimeters. The second was Earth, but she could not even directly call up her element. The third was Water, but she didn't succeed in lifting the ball at all. The fourth was also Water, and she raised the ball almost a foot, raising a good-natured cheer from the spectators as well.

Yuen finally stepped in front of Kei Sa. By this time, the little girl was nearly trembling with fear.

"What is your element, late child?" he addressed her.

"I-I d-don't know, sir," she stuttered, her teeth chattering from fright.

"You don't know." The emperor glared down at the tiny misfit. She was late, she didn't know her element, and above all, her eyes didn't match. "So lift the ball anyway," he instructed, placing it on the ground in front of her.

Kei Sa stared at the ball. It was fairly small, and very shiny, made out of a silver metal. She thought the ball looked very pretty, and she vainly wondered if the handmaiden would get earrings made of the same metal as the ball, as she really wanted some herself. Unsure of what she should do, she closed her eyes as she'd seen the wise men in town do. Silently, she willed the ball to rise. Please, she asked it, you must move for me. I don't know what my element is, so I cannot summon it. You must move on your own. If you don't, I'll probably be killed for being a late, unskilled, misfit, maybe in the same room as my mother was. Move. Up. In her head she envisioned the

ball. She started to notice small dents on the ball from being dropped on the ground by the other girls, though she hadn't noticed this when she actually looked at it. She felt the ball, as if she had it tied to a string, one which was in turn somehow connected to her brain, allowing her to freely move the ball. Kei Sa was surprised to find that she imagined it to be many times heavier than one would have thought. Rise, she commanded the ball on last time.

A gasp swept through the audience. Kei Sa opened her eyes. The silver ball was absolutely stationary.

Two feet above the ground.

Emperor Yuen looked as though he had seen the ghost of his dead wife. Kei Sa bit down the laugh that threatened to rise at his appearance and concentrated on the ball again, this time keeping her eyes open and finding it didn't really matter, nothing was gained except for the external image of things, rarely any more helpful than their presences. The little silver ball began to spin in the air. It rose more, until it was level with Yuen's head, still spinning, like a planet. Then the ball began to orbit the emperor's head, at nose level, even still spinning.

It's Viri! Kei Sa laughed to herself, orbiting close to the big mean sun that boils it.

She made the mistake of looking up at Emperor Yuen's face again, and couldn't help but start giggling.

He raised his hand high, preparing to swing it down into the side of her face that didn't already have a red hand print on it.

The silver ball clattered to the ground.

2. Part 1: Emancipation, I

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

Part 1:
>Emancipation
>Twenty-Nine Years Before MK1<p>

I.

* * *

><p>It did not take Ki Lah Rei long to realize what was happening. She understood what the first flash outside her window meant before she even heard the crash of the falling object's landing, impossibly loud. Emperor Yuen had promised destruction to any who dared to oppose him, and he was delivering it, with the help of his new missiles.<p>

She ducked under a table as the block across the street exploded into a giant fireball from the missile, the shock wave shattering her windows, along with the homes of her former neighbors. She crawled on the jagged shards, ripping her dress and slicing the palms of her hands, but she hardly felt the pain. Her only concern was that of her

precious son, barely six months old. Their chance of survival against the hellish extermination was to escape from this city, a city of rebellion. They had decided that they did not have to send their sons into the army as Yuen had ordered. They had built a church and held their services, all against Yuen's will. Yuen, the demon-worshiper, the foulest thing to have ever lived on Mandalore.

In the midst of her terror, Ki Lah Rei was overjoyed to see her baby boy was alive without even a scratch on his tiny body. She pulled him from his crib, holding him tightly in her arms as though to shield him from the world, and fled from her house.

Outside there was destruction, fire, death, everywhere she looked. She ran through the back streets, leaping over burnt, blackened bodies, and trying to ignore the ill fate of those she had known.

It was not long before she reached the outskirts of town. She had not seen even a single member of the Lin Kuei or the army, and she began to feel an overwhelming relief. Maybe she would survive this, after all.

Or maybe not.

A tall man appeared from nowhere and pulled her child from her arms before she could react. She fell to the ground, his vicious pull having stolen her balance. Raising her head, she saw that her attacker was none other than Emperor Yuen himself.

He stood, intimidating as a giant in the flickering light of the flame-engulfed town, holding her baby high in the air at arms' length, examining him. "He will make a good slave," he declared with a taunting smile.

Ki Lah Rei rose to her knees, begging shamelessly. "Please sir, I beseech you...you cannot wish to cause me the great heartache of living without my precious child!"

"But of course not," he answered. She could scarcely believe her ears. Mercy? From him?

Then Emperor Yuen's two-toed boot swung into her lowered head with unbelievable force, snapping her neck, and ending her life.

* * *

><p>Princess Yuen Ming carefully poured water into a small cup. Opera practice had already ended, but she had a score to settle. Hsu Lin was her main rival in voice, but Ming was a better acrobat and a better actress. Hsu Lin had a tendency to play all characters as the damsel-in-distress, even those who were strong. Her constant griping, and claiming that the only reason Ming only got the leading roles was because of her royalty, had annoyed Ming to the brink. To prove her point, Ming had challenged her to a contest.</p>

She picked up a long thin pole, gently bent with an obtuse angle and placed the shorter end in her mouth. She balanced the full cup on the end of the pole, and slowly leaned backward from the bar she was sitting on. Flexing her ankle around the bar, she pulled the other leg back and hung, suspended by the strength of her ankle, her toe touching the back of her head, not a drop of water from the cup

spilled.

Across the stage, Hsu Lin attempted the same, and Ming heard the crash of glass and body as they hit the stage. She took the cup out of her mouth and handed it to Kei Sa, her handmaiden, before doing a quick back flip to land on her feet.

The sound of a single person's applause reached her ears, and she looked to the doorway to see her friend Rah Cai Yue enthusiastically clapping for her, the radiating deep purple lines of his black eyes sparkling mischievously, as always. She smiled at him, then looked to Hsu Lin, who glared at her as she dejectedly stood up and fled, leaving her mess of broken glass and water behind.

Contented with her demonstration, Ming went to change.

A few minutes later, she stepped out of the changing room, to see her good friend was already awaiting her.

Rah Cai Yue now wore a shirt so garish that she felt she needed to shield her eyes from its glow. The dark blue of its background clashed extraordinarily well with the huge, nearly glowing orange suns printed on it.

"That's horrendous," she said.

"That's the point," he replied, just as she knew he would. They began walking away from the opera house, toward her room high in the tower of the palace.

"You really cannot stand to look like anyone else, can you?"

"No."

"So just where did you dig up that particular monstrosity?" she asked.

"A vendor brought it back from the Bahamas when he was on Earth a few weeks ago. I saw it from the corner of my eye as my mother looked through his imports for some cheap silver, and I knew I had to have it."

"Did she find any?"

"Of course not."

"Perhaps she should try the smugglers instead of the respectable traders."

"The smugglers scare her." He laughed.

Ming fingered her twisting silver earrings, absently. They were a visible sign of her lineage. "Father wants to keep what little silver there is in our family, as a royal symbol. However, there are other options. Gold is just as pretty, and far less expensive."

"And far more common. You don't seem to understand that the very reason she wants silver is its cost, its rarity. Yet she doesn't want to pay astronomical prices for it, so she's trying to get some from

Earthâ€" "

"â€"Where it's much cheaper."

"Of course. She just wants to look like she had the extra money to buy the silver, to make the other women jealous. She could wear as much gold as she wants. We certainly have plenty of it just lying around. It's sort of our family symbol, like your silver. We did get all our money selling the gold to European kingdoms in the time of Columbus, when they all relied on it as their source of power. We still sell it to humans, and though it's not as great a profit as it used to be, we still make more money than we need."

"Your mother really doesn't need to look for cheap silver, if you can afford the real prices."

"I know. That is what's so crazy about it. Sometimes, I think all women are insane." He saw the look she gave him, and corrected, "Except for you, of course. But speaking of gold, I think that in the 1500s is when the real corruption of the Mandalorians began. Everyone blames it on your father, and his Lin Kuei, but I don't think they're completely right. If you have ever heard the tales of the old Mandalorians, which you probably haven't, then you would understand that even after the Transformation they always seemed to be more like one would expect of angels, more like the Oracle, than they were like humans. It wasn't until they started making contact with them, and were able to take advantage of their less developed culture and situations that they changed. I believe that if that had never happened, a tyrant like your father would never have had any support, and would never have been able to take over as he had. He would have been crushed like a tiny insect."

"So what your saying is that it's all the humans' fault for being weak and young."

"Oh, sure. Humans are so easy to blame. I could probably blame every bad thing that has ever happened on the humans. Oh, they killed a butterfly that year, that must be what caused this war." He grinned at her.

"You are such a weirdo." Ming shook her head.

"Yeah, I know. This guy mistook me for a slave the other day. He just pushed me out of his way and yelled at me, calling me 'boy'. I don't know why he thought I was one. It couldn't have had anything to do with the fact that I was romping about slaves' quarters getting the latest news and treating them like people." He shook his head, sadly. "I feel really bad for them. They're just like us, only they don't have real names. I'm glad my parents don't use slaves. I asked my mother about it once, and she got angry, saying she was a respectable woman and she could do her own housework. I guess she really believes that a woman's main duty is to take care of her family."

"I don't like the slavery, either. I guess by normal palace standards I spoil Kei Sa. But I know she's a person, and she's a very agreeable one at that. My father sometimes yells at me for treating her like a friend, but that's what she is. If I had my choice, I'd set them all free."

"Your father's wrong about many things, like the trade restriction.

That's the only real reason there are smugglers. You know, I almost went into a smuggling place once," he reflected. "It wasn't for silver; I couldn't care less about your silver. There was an incredible sword inside."

"Speaking of which," interjected Ming, "Have you decided which weapon you wish to specialize in for training? I would pick the bo if I could."

"I am infinitely sorry that you were born of the inferior sexâ€œ."

"Am I going to have to hit you!" Ming retaliated, stepping away in anger.

"â€œBut I have chosen a weapon." He grinned. "The short sword. The sword I saw in the smuggler's display is what inspired me. It was so beautiful. I could hear it calling to me: 'Cai Yue, take me, you need me...' Well, maybe not, but you understand, don't you? Perhaps, after I learn how to fight with my sword, I can persuade my parents to give me enough money to have a sword like that forged. Do you think they would?"

Ming was still laughing from the voice he had created when pretending to be the sword. "I think they'd be overjoyed that it wasn't a stupid shirt."

"Hey, be nice. You know, I really did want that sword, but I was scared to get it. Not because the smugglers frighten me, but because of what your father would do to me if I got caught making contact with a smuggler."

"I think you're overestimating the punishment my father would bestow on you."

"Are you kidding? Overestimating the cruelty of your evil tyrannical father? That's not possible."

Ming gasped and slapped her hand over his mouth. "Cai Yue! Watch what you're saying."

"It's true. Ming, the humans have more freedom than us, for crying out loud. Think about itâ€œfreedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion. They either have these things or want them badly enough to put up some sort of resistance. And it's certainly not a matter of intelligence of cultural development. The Americans have these freedoms guaranteed. It's the foundation of their country. And look at what they're wearing!"

Ming raised her eyebrows. "Look at what you're wearing."

"Don't interrupt my speech. The Americans and I are not comparable. I'm wearing this to be different. The Americans are being 'cool'. Honestly though, bell-bottoms." He threw his hands in the air with exasperation. "Bell-bottoms! Why?"

Cai Yue suddenly froze, then dropped his hands and looked at Ming. "Where was I?"

"Freedom of speech..."

"Ah, yes. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press. They can say whatever they want or print things derogatory about their leader and their government cannot imprison or kill them simply for that. Freedom of religion..." He trailed off, and opened the door for her, for they had reached the tower. "Ming, half of the rebellions are about religion. It used to be such an integral part of the Mandalorian culture. And your father outlawed it. Those people just want to read their Bibles. They're not asking for church services, they're not asking to be able to evangelize. They want to read a book."

"So maybe my father is a tyrant. That doesn't make him complete evil."

"He had your mother assassinated!"

"You don't know that!" Ming cried, suddenly on the verge of hysterics.

"Maybe it's not a proven fact, but you ask anyone--besides your father or a Lin Kuei, or even part of the army; you don't want to be killed--and that's what they'll tell you. Even your great-great-grandmother."

"Stop," pleaded Ming, increasing her pace as she rounded the last stair and entered the hall to her room. Cai Yue chased her and grabbed her arm, making her listen.

"Maybe you don't want to hear what I have to say, but it's the truth. Your father is evil. No other word describes him."

"It's not true..." whispered Ming through her tears; "It's not possible..."

"There's a word for you, Yuen Ming, and it starts with 'denial'."

She wrenched her arm from his grasp and dashed into her suite, slamming the door in his face.

Rah Cai Yue stood in silence for several seconds. "I'm sorry to have to tell you these things," he whispered finally, well aware that Ming could not possibly hear him. "But if I don't, who will? And I care about you far too much to see you fall under your father's control." Shaking his head, he slowly started the long trek back to his father's section of the palace.

* * *

><p>"You are late," said Shang Tsung. "The Master is not pleased."<p>

"I was unavoidably detained. The rebels must be crushed without hesitation or others will join their cause." Emperor Yuen slightly raised an eyebrow, as if challenging the sorcerer to press the subject.

Evil came in many different forms, and it was clearly demonstrated by these two. Shang Tsung was slight of stature, formerly a Chinese

human. He had sold his soul in exchange for the necromantic power that allowed him to gain life and power from the stolen souls of others. His blank white eyes reflected this emptiness. His brain child, the Mortal Kombat tournament, had necessitated the stockpiling of this power, and Shang Tsung had not been able to use sufficient quantities of it to restore his youth in quite some time. Therefore, he was beginning to show his true age, and he was very old, indeed.

Emperor Yuen looked as though he could easily pulverize in single combat anyone who dared to defy him in even the smallest degree. He wore what was essentially a ninja uniform, though not a Lin Kuei outfit. He was intimidating enough with his stern gaze, greater than average height, and solid build that the only identification he needed was the small silver pin emblazoned with his family crest on his collar. As was the way with Mandalorians, he retained a fair amount of youth though he had nearly full-grown twin children. A sword rested on his hip, a symbol of the honor he did not possess. Usually he was accompanied by two of his most trusted Lin Kuei, in case someone was suicidal enough to attempt an assassination, but he brought no one with him to the secret throne room of the Demon Master. The Empire which he had created spanned all but one of the habitable planets in the galaxyâ€"Earth, which was protected from outside influence, and from that the need for the Mortal Kombat tournament had risen.

"Ah, of course," acknowledged Tsung, as they began their descent into the Master's lair. "We must never let them think they are stronger than we are. It gives them courage, and sometimes suicidal, last-chance shots succeed, if they are brave enough to try."

"You sound as if you are talking from experience, necromancer."

"Remind me to tell you of Kung Lao sometime. It's his fault I lost the tournament so many years ago. My only regret is that he didn't die slowly..."

"Speaking of your tournament, is your plan succeeding?"

"There is only a little less than twenty-nine more years until the last one I will ever have to do."

"You sound overconfident, sorcerer. What if you lose the next one?"

"Impossible, Emperor. You have met Goro, haven't you?" Tsung opened another door and they started down the stairs. "And just how is lovely Ming doing?"

Yuen gave him a questioning look. "My daughter?"

"Yes! How many Mings do you know?"

"She's fine," he said flatly.

"Does she look like her mother?"

"Yes, I guess she does," Yuen answered, suspiciously regarding his ally.

"So blinded by power he can't even recognize beauty," murmured Tsung under his breath.

"What was that, sorcerer?"

"Nothing of importance, Emperor," he replied, just as they rounded the corner and entered the lair of the Demon Master.

Number Two, Number Three, enter, the master sent telepathically, not moving from his lying position on his dragon shaped pallet. He was yet another form of evil, the kind that had never had a chance to be righteous. He had been created by Lucifer, a eunuch, immortal.

There is a problem that has come to my attention, regarding the prophecies that I have seen. You remember that I have foreseen that our grip on the galaxy will be disrupted twice, the second forever.

"But of course, Master," said Tsung.

It has come to my attention that your daughter, Number Three, shares many characteristics with one I have seen. She is a threat to us.

"My daughter could never hurt a fly, Master," said Emperor Yuen. "She has no courage."

Shang Tsung shook his head. "Well, you can't expect the first Mandalorian in history to ally with us to understand everything immediately. She does not have to be one who destroys us. She could merely be an influence on the one who causes our defeat. Whatever the case, she must be important if the Master has seen her." He looked over to the pallet. "But you did say that the Mandalorians have to defeat us twice, and they haven't defeated us yet, so we still have an extra chance to use up. What are you worried about?"

"If any kind of battle is fought, we could lose valuable resources," said Yuen.

More importantly, the best way to keep them from winning twice, is to keep them from winning once.

"That is a good point, Master," agreed Tsung. "Do not worry, we will take care of Ming."

* * *

><p>"So just how do you propose we take care of Ming, sorcerer?" The two conspirators were walking back to the surface. "I say we simply kill her."<p>

"Emperor! I am shocked! Kill your own daughter? And such a beautiful one, indeed. No, no, no. But, say, if I were to marry your daughter, then I could control her, and she could not fight against me."

"Marry her? You're sure you would be willing to do that."

"Willing? Emperor, I'd be delighted! And besides, then, if something were to happen to you. Who would inherit the Mandalorian Empire? Not

that weakling son of yours. Me."

"Yes, I suppose that would work out rather nicely." Emperor Yuen smiled.

3. II

The Queen's Honor Guard

>by Nyohah<p>

II.

* * *

><p>Hua Quy Ling was bored.<p>

Officially, he was not a slave, but as far as it really mattered, he was treated exactly like one. No one ever called him by name, it was either 'slave', 'you', or 'boy', which really irked him. He was seventeen years old. Definitely not a boy. No one ever gave him a choice of his activities, either. All he ever did was guard doors, guard carriages, guard entrances, guard buildings. All day, every day. And it was not as if anything ever happened. No one had the nerve to attack Emperor Yuen.

Not even Quy Ling, himself. Not even the one person who would not have to fight the guards. He had easy access, and was certainly clever enough to come up with a suitable plan, and yet...

It was true; he was scared to death of the emperor. Anytime he got even got an inkling of an idea for a plan of vengeance, he could think only of his parents, not alive and vibrant, but dead, fallen, soaked with their own blood. And their murderer, casually walking away, not fatigued, not bloodied, like an exterminator having rid the world of two very small, fragile pests.

And now here he was, the son of the two most well-organized rebels of their time, guarding the door to the emperor's dining hall.

At least he had something to look forward to, today. She would be here, soon. Very soon, in fact, he corrected, as he saw the two white mares that pulled the princess's carriage trotting nimbly down the stone-paved road. A formal dinner, then, celebrating the Emperor's return, to require the carriage when the princess preferred to walk.

The small white carriage stopped, the horses tossing their heads playfully, and a young man sitting beside the driver stepped down. Quy Ling recognized him, Lan Yiao Nih, a former military trainee, and an exceptional fighter. He had recently been condemned to the same boredom as Quy Lingâ€"as the guard for the princess's carriageâ€"due to insubordination, and not killed due the luck that the General's son wasn't nearly so cranky as his father.

Lan Yiao Nih opened the door and bowed respectfully to the princess as she exited. Yuen Ming looked irritated with her dress, a stiff, restricting thing recently imported from Earth, and even more so with the white makeup she was forced to wear. As though in protest, her hair was done as simply as her father would tolerate. She crossed to

the dining hall doors quickly, and Hua Quy Ling bowed as he opened the door for her.

But it was after the princess had disappeared and bowing was no longer necessary that out stepped what had to be the most gorgeous creature on Mandalore. Her purity, reflected in the plain white hooded dress she wore. Her skin, of wintry cream and flawless. Her eyes, both deep blue and green, enchantingly beautiful. Her gait, smooth asâ€"

Hua Quy Ling shut the door quietly behind her and turned, to see Xiao Nih shaking with unconcealed laughter.

"Oh, you've got it bad," he chuckled.

"No, I don't," Quy Ling, denied, beginning to turn red with embarrassment.

"What a liar. I saw the way you watched her. I can just imagine you making up Shakespeare in your head. 'Her skin like flawless wintry cream.'" He began to laugh uncontrollably. Quy Ling turned away, even redder.

"But honestly," continued the guard once he'd regained control of himself. "Why her? I mean, she's pretty and all, but distant, and...disconcerting. I mean, her eyes..." He shuddered.

"I don't think she's frightening in the least."

"Don't you? Perhaps you've never seen her fight. Women aren't supposed to be able to fight, and I know she's never had anything beyond what they may have learned in the opera, but, my God. Some of the other men challenged her once. There were, I think, five of them. One after another, they got beaten badly, and they hardly even hit her. Just once, and even then she managed to turn away so it just barely tapped her on the shoulder. It was like...I don't know, this is going to sound stupid, but...almost as though she knew what they were going to do before they did it."

"Really...?" breathed Quy Ling, mystified.

"Yeah, look, she's dangerous. So, just stay away from her, okay?"

"Sure," he said, hardly meaning it. Beautiful, and a good fighter?

Incredible...

* * *

><p>"That was quite a close call," the old man was saying. "I thought he might be good enough to cause Goro some trouble. But it turned out he was scared to death of him, and lost all his composure. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd wet himself." He dipped his ceramic spoon into the soup once more, sipping it and making satisfactory noises before continuing. "That is something many people underestimate. The fear factor. But not you and me, eh, Your Highness?"<p>

He was, truly, extraordinarily old, thought Ming. Probably even older

than Grandmamma, and Grandmamma was old. He was also obviously someone of great importance, this Shang Tsung, to be able to communicate with her father on such equal terms without being reprimanded at the very least. But he kept rambling on about some tournament. It was actually quite interesting, and she would have liked to know more about some of the fights, especially this Kung Lao that had beaten the invincible monster Goro, where so many others had failed.

But Ming was not allowed to speak. Women should be seen, not heard, according to her father. Especially in the presence of esteemed guests. So Ming sat, habit keeping her back straight and her chin up even throughout her boredom and frustration. She ate silently, taking dainty little portions, and sipping her tea after every three bites, as she had been taught, reluctantly accepting the fact that she was none other than an ornament, a pretty decoration to look at.

And becoming more and more disturbed as the old man refused to take his eyes off her.

Sitting beside her, having been ousted from his seat by the old guest, and apparently completely unaware of the man's leering, Ming's brother Jer Rod, spoke. "I take it there are no weapons in this tournament of yours?"

"Occasionally, yes, there are. However they are used very sporadically, certainly not as the main method of fighting. We like to concentrate on unarmed strikes. The best warriors have special skills they can use, often akin to your elemental powers, though they are only allowed such powerful strikes as trained Mandalorians are often capable of to finish off a fighter; to kill him. Most fighters aren't quite so blessed, but of course they end up dying not far into the tournamentâ€""

"While all of this talk of fighting is quite interesting, Tsung, perhaps we should inform the others of why you are here." Emperor Yuen pushed his empty plate away from the edge of the table and directed his attention to his daughter. "Ming, this meal was formal not only because of our esteemed guest, but also because you are to be wed."

Ming took a deep breath, gaining her composure. "Pardon, father? I am to marry soon? To whom?" She studied her father's face through the silence, searching for a clue. Several long seconds later, she glanced quickly over at the guest, and then, as realization struck, her mouth slackened in disbelief. "You can't be serious..." she breathed.

"Shang Tsung is a very highly esteemed colleague of mine, not to mention a powerful necromancer and a master over the powers of sorcery," Yuen stated firmly.

"...B-but, he's so..._old_!"

"Not for much longer, if all goes to plan." The old man smiled at her, and Ming stood in protest.

"Sit, child," commanded the emperor, his patience wearing thin.

"You cannot expect me to be this, this sorcerer's wife."

"I will not repeat myself anymore. Sit and be quiet. I have no tolerance for disobedient women."

"You cannot make me to do this! You haven't the right!" She slammed her fist down on the table, bouncing the plates.

Emperor Yuen rose in anger. "Sit and be obedient or you will regret this day for the rest of your life."

They stood, like father, like daughter, staring each other down; two pairs of eyes blazing with anger, four clenched, trembling fists. After what seemed like minutes, Ming lowered her head, and Yuen assumed victory. He sat back down and started on his dessert, but Ming had not given in.

"I will not," she whispered very calmly, then turned and walked out of the dining hall.

* * *

><p>Sitting in the shadows of a secluded corner by the kitchen, Kei Sa quietly ate her meal--the burned bits of poultry, shrimp too runty to be served, slightly less than fresh vegetables, anything not fit for royalty to eat. She certainly did not have the best meals of the slaves, as the kitchen staff had leftovers to look forward to, but neither was she unfortunate. At least she could imagine what the real meal tasted like; many among the slaves lived half-starved on rice and yesterday's bread, some had never tasted freshly cooked meat, burnt or otherwise.</p>

She typically closed her eyes in a game she played, paying more attention to the smells of the good food than her tongue, tasting the warm, lightly seasoned aromas that surrounded, drifting from the long mahogany table and the kitchen, imagining she was eating the real thing.

However that day's meal was far too interesting for Kei Sa to close her eyes and ignore. She saw everything, Ming growing increasingly agitated, and finally standing, her father yelling at her, Ming walking away.

Not a second after the door had swung close, Kei Sa followed, walking past Yuen Po, who was somehow managing to keep her great-grandson from storming out after his daughter, and then past the guards outside the door, who seemed dumbstruck by the princess's departure.

Ming had begun to sprint immediately after she left the building, and Kei Sa chased after her, all the way to her chambers, catching the door just before it closed. She shook her lightly pinched fingers as she stepped through the entryway.

Inside, Ming was rushing about with no apparent purpose, grumbling incoherently to herself. Kei Sa watched, perturbed, as Ming stamped ungracefully across the room, viciously wrenching at the pins in her hair until it cascaded, loose, against her back. As she passed the doorway, Kei Sa caught some of her muttering, something about a wedding and a...sorcerer?

Ming reappeared, dragging a large trunk behind her. She hoisted it onto a stand by her dresser and opened the top drawer. Digging through it for a few seconds, spilling sashes on the ground, she realized nothing she wanted was in this particular drawer, and she slammed it shut. She opened the next drawer, pulled out its only contents—a rich emerald fighting outfit—and dropped it into the trunk. She proceeded to the next drawer, but a quick glance at its useless contents caused her to slam it shut just as quickly. She went through the rest of the drawers, growing frustrated with the lack of suitable clothes until, in anger, she kicked the trunk. It crashed to the ground and fell open. Ming retrieved the green silk outfit, its only contents.

She stripped off her stiff dress, not caring that she ripped the expensive fabric and slung it across the room. Donning her only fighting outfit and snatching a pair of plain black shoes, Ming continued over to her bed and kicked off the fluffy comforter. She tied the underlying sheets together and hung them out her window, high in the tower.

"Kei Sa," she said at last. "We need more sheets."

"Certainly," the handmaiden replied, dashing out to fetch some. When she returned, heavily laden with spare sheets, she said, "May I ask where we're going?"

"Opal Coast," the princess replied calmly, still tying sheets together.

"Opal Coast..." Kei Sa wondered. Then the truth hit her and she gasped. "You don't mean...the Oracle?"

"Yes, of course."

"But you can be tried for treason just for speaking her name!"

"True, but she and her students have also withstood every attack my father has made. They are the very reason he bought those missiles. That must mean something." She threw the sheets out the window, where they finally hit the ground. "I won't stand for this."

* * *

><p>Emperor Yuen was irate.</p>

In all his years of serving the man, as a Lin Kuei and as a bodyguard, Tempest had never seen him lose all control as he had now. Before, when angry, he had always remained calm, channeling his anger, using it as a source of energy and ambition, as befit his element, ice. Yet now he was pacing aimlessly, a mad tiger in a cage, waiting for someone foolish enough to venture too closely.

But no one did. Tempest stayed on the far side of the room. The boy, Quy, was nearly cowering in the corner. Shang Tsung was relaxing on an armchair, still far out of reach of the emperor. And even the ever-present Vendetta—Yuen's primary bodyguard and the one person, besides perhaps Yuen Po, who did not fear him—was leaning against a bookcase, seemingly unworried, but out of the way.

Without warning, Emperor Yuen rounded on Hua Quy Ling. "You! Go fetch my daughter! I will show her who is in charge here." Terrified, the young guard sprinted away.

"I will teach her to never defy me," continued Yuen, wringing his hands as he concocted her punishment.

But when the boy returned he was alone. He trembled as he tried to gather the courage to speak.

"What is the problem?" demanded the emperor. "Out with it, boy!"

"Yuen Ming and Kei Sa are gone."

4. III

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

Twenty-Eight Years Before MK1

III.

* * *

><p>The rising sun glittered on the sea, shining on the rich pastures of Opal Coast. On a cliff wall well worn by the sea sat a humble village, unlike all the others because of its surrounding walls and large temple.<p>

Sitting on the steps of the Oracle's temple, Yuen Ming sighed as she watched the children play. Opal Coast was beautiful, in its own way, but nothing could ever compare to the silver sand, lush forest, and marble palace that was home. She had been away for nearly a year, and she wanted to go back. She had become an excellent fighter, training under the best teacher that could be found. The Oracle did not appear to be anyone's interpretation of the perfect fighter, especially with her feminine figure, her ivory skin nearly matching the whites of her eyes. But she knew more about every fighting style than anyone else in existence. Though Ming could not beat Kei Sa, no one could, except the Oracle, so that was no way to judge oneself. She felt able to defend herself, which was what mattered, and more importantly, she had given her father plenty of time to cool down to his normal self.

Besides which, Ming was frustrated with the Oracle's new topic of study. She had been trying for nearly a week, but she had not managed even a flicker of the elemental power she possessed. Watching the children did not help her temper; they could all show their elements. Perhaps it was not strong enough to serve any purpose, but they easily manifested it nonetheless, and that angered Ming.

Far too soon, the Oracle appeared behind her. The being's dress reflected an odd mixture of culture, from her Egyptian headdress, adorned with a yin-yang rather than a snakeâ€"it had been a gift from Josephâ€"to her scarlet Japanese dress, hung open to reveal the simple white robes underneath, and bulging where it concealed her feathered wings. "Are you sufficiently rested, Yuen Ming?" she asked

in her melodious voice that had always seemed too thick to come from behind her narrowly parted golden lips.

"Yes, Oracle," Ming conceded, but inside the spacious marble temple, the tall woman began the same exercises again, and Ming became frustrated.

"Why must we waste so much time on this skill? I could be practicing real fighting skills, with my bo, or unarmed. Why must we do this?"

The Oracle was silent, and when she responded to Ming's angry questioning, her voice was very soft. "Dearest child," she whispered, "Come with me."

Ming followed her through the temple, then down a winding staircase into a room she had never seen before. Its only content was a large well, with water that looked so pure that the sight of it actually made Ming thirst for it, more strongly than she had ever needed liquid before.

The Oracle turned to Ming, her elliptical golden pupils seeming to glow in her black irises, and warned, "Do not be fooled by this holy water. Only I can touch it. Any others who dare to do so will be destroyed."

Ming swallowed and tried to forget her sudden thirst as the Oracle dipped her hand into the water and began.

"Watch carefully, my child.

"Power--all power--has a price. Yet if it comes from our Creator, the only price is faith, and righteousness. The Mandalorians have such a power in their ability to call upon an element. And it is a great power, indeed."

In the well a picture swirled into view, one of extreme violence. Ming saw Tempest, in the midst of a great battle, wearing only his Lin Kuei uniform instead of the typical battle armor. A huge team of rebel soldiers surged forward carrying their crude weapons. Though he had no allies in sight, Tempest stood his ground. Suddenly, he threw his arms forward, and a huge gale of wind swept across the Rebels, literally tearing them apart with its force. When Tempest lowered his arms and walked away, not one of his attackers lived. He had killed them all in mere seconds.

Then Ming saw Vendetta. He was surrounded completely by attackers. But he, too, threw his arms out and he seemed to explode into a giant fireball that ripped across his enemies, reducing them to ashes. When the glare subsided, Vendetta alone still stood.

Ming stood in silence, shocked. She had never seen anything like that before. Finally she whispered, "Can all Mandalorians do that?"

The Oracle slowly shook her head. "In all reality, you all use your power to some extent every day."

"How?" Ming did not recall ever having used her power.

The Oracle smiled. "Sunstones," she said. "No human could ever

activate one. Yet if you mean elemental power, most can call up their elements, in small amounts like the children. About half have been trained enough to use theirs for defense. Very few can cause such carnage as Tempest and Vendetta, your father included. Before your father took over, the number was far higher. Most were warriors. Yet now, their skills have atrophied."

"Then why had I never seen such power before I came here?"

"Your father forbid all those except for Lin Kuei and army officers from using their elements."

"And my prospective handmaidens," Ming added, remembering the day so long ago when Kei Sa had been chosen, even though she did not have an element. "But why?"

"He's afraid. He's hidden the truth from the young, not allowing them to know their own history, in an attempt to keep them from discovering it in their studies. The old are afraid of him, still recalling his coup."

"Rah Cai Yue knows a bit about history," mused Ming.

"He knows more than a bit, and he did all his research on his own. He has an incredible charm. People listen to him and tell him things they wouldn't tell other people. It comes with his element."

"Which is?"

"Gravity. Quite rare, actually... He knows more than you, Yuen Ming. Perhaps you should listen more to him." She paused. "Ming, do you wish to know your history?"

"Yes, Oracle. More than anything."

"The universe began with a song," she said, and the water in the well seemed to spin, conjuring up the scene. "The stars were created, then the planets. Among these, a planet in a system with eight others, one with violent volcanic activity, and one nearly covered with a deep blue sea."

"On the oceanic planet, one of the first races began. They were beautiful dragons, almost insect-like. They were the Mandalorians."

In the well, Ming saw water dragons, peaceful herbivores. They were pearlescent, with huge black eyes. They were quite long, but most of this length was the tail. The bodies themselves were very small. Their wings were huge, but bat-like, with 'fingers' connecting a transparent liquid they secreted to form the membranes. The same liquid was used to form webbing on their feet for swimming. When not needed, the wings merged into ridges on the side of their bodies. They weighed so little they could stand on the surface of the water for a short time, and they certainly floated well enough.

She thought they were incredibly beautiful.

"Though they did resemble mere animals, they were very smart, along with very beautiful."

"Yet it was none of this that caused them to be hated.

"Evil hated the Mandalorians because not only were they unwaveringly virtuous, they were unbelievably powerful. They leaders in the forces of Evil could not set foot on Mandalore. Their servants were almost instantaneously destroyed or repelled.

"The forces of Evil were led by Lucifer, as they always have been, but the Mandalorians worst enemy was a nameless thing, best described as a demon, and quite frankly, Lucifer's second-in-command.

"Just as true human civilization was beginning, in Mesopotamia, the Edenians developed space travel, with the aid of their extraordinary power source, Hithron. Although the ships still traveled very slowly in the grand scheme of things, and it took months to reach one civilized planet from another, this technology spread through the galaxy quickly, except for Earth, which is protected from our influence, and Mandalore, which had no interest in it. They were perfectly happy alone on their planet.

"As you can guess, this technology changed everything. Someone made the mistake of transporting some Centaurian males from Kloesh to their sister planet, Shokan, where they started a war with the four-armed giants there. Ever since, ships landing on either planet are at risk of take-over by hostile six-limbed males wanting to fight on the other.

"It also sparked a galaxy-wide jealousy of the Mandalorians. They never fought, had vast riches on their planet that they did not wish to exploit, lived for hundreds of years, and most importantly, they alone could make space travel truly rational. The Mandalorians have always been capable of traveling in the fifth dimensionâ€"or teleporting, as most would say. Essentially, they were able to go anywhere in the galaxy almost instantaneously.

"The demon master snatched this opportunity to destroy his biggest obstacles. You see, the Mandalorians alone kept him from conquering this galaxy and gaining more power. Power is what Evil craves most of all. He fueled envy into fear, fear into hatred, and hatred into violence.

"The Mandalorians had no way to protect themselves. Their power could only be used against Evil, and the frightened and mislead citizens were rarely that. It seemed they would be utterly destroyed, but they asked the Creator for something no one had ever suspected.

"They gave up their docile dragon shape."

The Oracle paused and looked up at Ming, who blinked away the tears that the pictures of such unjust genocide had caused.

"They had studied the species in the galaxy. There weren't many: four armed Shokans, four legged Centaurians, dinosaur-like Raptors from Chiss, the large blind rodents from Meerta. And then there were humans, and their cousins, the Edenians. They decided on this form, and their request was granted.

"The Transformation caught the galaxy off-guard. The Mandalorians weren't exactly human, but they could easily pass for them to those who did not look too closely. They always have the blackest hair

possible, and eyes any color but brown. At the time, they were taller than the humans, but they've grown in stature, and the Mandalorians haven't. They have higher metabolisms, and while their life span decreased dramatically, they still live nearly two centuries. Most surprising of all was how they kept their power.

"They swiftly developed a fighting style dependent on discipline, and like so much involved with them, its beauty concealed its power. It was not long before the violence ceased and the Demon Master's illusion was shattered. The others were still envious, but they began to see them as they truly were--kind, fair, peaceful.

The first race to ally with the Mandalorians was the Edenians, and the rest followed, forming a loose alliance under the promise of protection from the Mandalorians. Several millennia passed without a single bad seed from the Mandalorians, until one young man finally discovered how to use his power against things that were not Evil, and took over the union in a short but bloody coup.

"He was Emperor Yuen."

The last of the images faded away from the crystal clear water, and Ming had only one thing to say. "How did he use them against good? How can the Lin Kuei use their powers against the rebels when the Lin Kuei are the evil ones?"

"The Lin Kuei, formed by your father as a clan of those who knew how to use their power in this way, force their power to come. It hurts them to do so, and every time they do this, they lose a little of their resistance to it. Some day, Tempest will be ripped apart by his own Wind, or Vendetta blown apart by his own Fire. Yet if you use it correctly, your power can actually heal wounds when used in a fight."

Ming closed her eyes, nearly overwhelmed. "Thank you, Oracle."

"That is all for today, Ming."

* * *

><p>Kei Sa sat in her favorite spot, far from the bustle of the village, dangling her bare feet over the edge of the temple's roof, and staring down the sheer cliff that met its back wall.</p>

She heard the quiet rustling of cloth, and glanced backward to see that the Oracle now stood behind her. She wasn't a true Oracle, really. She knew nothing of the future. Yet she knew everything that had ever happened in the past, and was simply the best warrior that could be found. She knew every fighting style that had ever existed in the galaxy, every military tactic ever used, and the weaknesses and strengths of each. Besides which, to call a divine being by its true name was disrespectful, so everyone called her the Oracle.

"Ming has been looking for you, Kei Sa," she said.

"Yet you did not simply tell her where I was?"

"I know you wouldn't be here unless you did not wish to be disturbed. Tell me, Kei Sa, is something upsetting you?"

The seventeen-year-old sighed. "I am worried about Ming. Will she never accept the truth?"

"I showed her the history today. I showed her Emperor Yuen taking over, slaughtering any who dared to stand in his path. I believe she will be far less resistant to the truth now. Do not worry about her, Kei Sa. She'll understand before it is too late. And please do not try to fool me, Kei Sa. I know you are not simply worried about the princess."

Kei Sa sighed again. "You are far too adept at mind-reading."

"And you broadcast your thoughts to any who are even remotely capable of receiving them. It is a weakness you must rid yourself of, though it could be a blessing if you can send them to those without telepathic powers. Unfortunately, I cannot teach you how."

"That is precisely the problem. No one can help me. No one can teach me to use my powers. Not even you."

The Oracle slowly shook her head. "I am sorry, Kei Sa, but you are the first of your race to have such powers. All other Mandalorians have always had elements."

"I feel as though I have more power than I could ever possibly need, and absolutely no way to access it. It is like having more silver than exists on Mandalore, yet being stuck on a deserted island that no one ever visits without the hope of ever being rescued or able to go home. The silver is absolutely useless."

The Oracle did not reply. Sitting motionless in the evening stillness, Kei Sa felt as though something was inexplicably wrong...

Without a second thought she threw herself into a backward somersault, rolling away from the lethal drop of the cliff. She finished her roll just in time to see the Oracle finish a kick, a kick more than powerful enough to have sent Kei Sa plunging to her death.

Kei Sa was speechless with shock.

"I think," the Oracle said quite calmly, "your powers serve you more than you realize. They came to you visibly when you needed them to. Trust me, child, you will discover the key when you need it the most."

* * *

><p>Kei Sa climbed down from the temple's roof, still shaken from the Oracle's risky demonstration. Now, it seemed that Ming had disappeared, and Kei Sa could not imagine where she had gone.<p>

She stood on the steps of the temple, scanning the roads ahead of her for any sign of the princess. After a few minutes, she gave up and began to climb the stairs. Perhaps Ming was already inside.

"Kei Sa!" came a voice behind her, punctuated by the clopping of horses' hooves. "I have been looking everywhere for you." Ming stood

at the foot of the stairs, and Kei Sa had no idea where she had come from. Then she realized Ming had been at the stables, beside the temple instead of in front, for she held the reins of her gorgeous black stallion, and those of a slightly small gray horseâ€"Rah Cai Yue's mother's horseâ€"that they had taken when they had fled nearly a year ago.

"What are you doing?"

"Come on, Kei Sa. I have already packed your things. We must hurry."

"Are we going somewhere?"

"Yes. We're going home, and if we leave now, we can be back before anyone wakes up in the morning." Kei Sa began to protest, but Ming silenced her, raising her hand. "It has been a year. My father could not possibly still be angry with me."

"Yuen Ming, please stop," said a new voice from the temple entrance. Ming and Kei Sa both turned to face the Oracle. "Please, child," she continued, "do not underestimate your father. Stay and learn how to use your element. You cannot predict what Emperor Yuen will do in his anger."

Ming stood in silence for nearly a minute, contemplating this. Finally, she said, "I am the princess. I am strong. I am able to take care of myself. My father will not be my downfall." She swiftly mounted her horse, and, rather reluctantly, Kei Sa did the same. They rode off at a gallop, and the Oracle solemnly watched them go, hoping Ming would suddenly change her mind and return.

But she didn't, and finally the Oracle whispered, "No, Yuen Ming. Your pride will be your downfall."

5. IV

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

**IV. **

* * *

><p>It was just after dawn, and Hua Quy Ling was nearly alone on the beach.<p>

Of course, that was because all the sane people were sleeping, he thought unhappily. Everything was deserted, from the princess's tower windowâ€"which was always deserted, since she was goneâ€"to the army's new training ground, out by the metallic glint of the missile silos, hidden in the lush forest. Of course, the missiles had nowhere near the destructive capabilities of the nuclear warheads the humans had in their missile silos. Only the humans would be that stupid.

Essentially, there were no possible distractions anywhere. The birds were not even singing. Yet that was probably why Vendetta, the only other person around, had forced him out on the beach to train.

Vendetta was constantly complaining that Quy was too easily distracted.

Pacing in front of him, facing the calm morning sea, Vendetta barked commands. Quy Ling followed them without hesitation and to the best of his ability, but he had already decided that wasn't enough for Vendetta. Nothing short of perfection ever would be.

Sweating hard in the cool breeze, Hua Quy Ling practiced a difficult form with his katana. He was doing quite well--the best he'd ever done, certainly--but Vendetta still scowled beneath his mask. Then, Quy saw a movement near the palace. It was two rather petite figures on horses. The first rider had a long braid, and the second, on the smaller horse...

He would know that profile anywhere. Startled, he lost his concentration and dropped his katana onto the soft, white, sand.

"What is it now, boy?" demanded Vendetta. "What could possibly have distracted you this time?"

Quy Ling swallowed. "I think the princess and her handmaiden have returned," he said carefully.

Vendetta's manner changed instantly. "Well, don't be a fool, boy. Go tell Emperor Yuen. Now!"

Hua Quy Ling sprinted across the sand.

* * *

><p>High in the palace, Emperor Yuen sat at his desk, inspecting a list. The Edenian nobleman who had brought it stood in front of the desk, looking nervous at best.</p>

The emperor read through the things that the Edenian wanted to trade leisurely. "...slaves, yes...gold, certainly..." Then he stopped and looked up at the Edenian, raising his eyebrows. "Silver? That is going to cost you quite a lot. And what are you offering in exchange?" The Edenian did not speak, and Yuen scanned another sheet. "Rubies, emeralds, sapphires, diamonds... Are you trying to cheat me? I know how little these mean to you. They will certainly cover the rest of these items, but silver? I want Hithron."

The Edenian blanched. Hithron powered all starships. At the moment, Yuen had very few of them, but with more Hithron, and therefore more space flight, his grip on the galaxy would only tighten. That was the last thing anyone wanted, and the Edenian would far rather not have the silver than give him any Hithron... Yet could he deny Yuen to his face?

"Yes, sir," he said finally. "I will get you Hithron." Yuen began to smile, but at that moment, a teenage boy burst in, gasping for air.

"Princess Yuen Ming and Kei Sa have returned," he panted.

* * *

><p>There was only one person who had ever caused Emperor Yuen such stress that he paced his office, at a loss for actions. And she was back.</p>

Shang Tsung had seized Yuen's chair and looked through the hastily departed Edenian's papers with dwindling interest as Yuen fretted this unexpected problem.

"I cannot let her escape punishment," Yuen mused aloud.

"Certainly not," agreed Tsung, absently, flipping a page.

"Yet what would be a suitable punishment...?" He turned sharply on his left foot and turned to the window. The army had begun to gather on the training fields outside. "She could do a slave's work...clean the Great Halls floor, yes, that is it... I should treat her as a slave for a while, make her see her fortune..."

"Of course..." muttered Tsung. It was incredible how invaluable diamonds were on Edenia. Perhaps he should stop there on his way back to Earth to pick some up.

"Yet what of that handmaiden of hers? She is used to hard labor... And there is always the problem of how we are going to eliminate Ming as a threat. It seems more likely each day that the Master is right about her."

Tsung stacked the papers and sighed. "There's no reason our original plan will not work."

"She will not marry you."

"Not willingly, but what if I were to go in her room and make her have to. In order to save her honor."

Yuen looked blank for a few seconds. "You will defile her?"

"Yes," sighed Tsung.

"And you are certain this will work?"

"Absolutely."

"Very well," agreed Yuen.

* * *

><p>Yuen Ming sprinted from her rooms, down the spiraling staircases, through the marble halls. She wrenched open a thick mahogany door and stormed into her father's study, flushed and irate.</p>

"What do you think you are doing?" she screamed.

Emperor Yuen slowly stood, shocked by his daughter's raised voice. She had never yelled in his presence before. This was unacceptable, but first... "Where is Shang Tsung?"

"On the floor in pain!" spat Ming. "Do you think the Oracle taught me nothing?"

Yuen seethed, and struggled to maintain his usual calm composure. Anger would get him nowhere with her; he had learned that the last time. "I cannot believe such rebellion as I have gotten from you. Your brother has never been a fraction of the trouble you have shown yourself to be. He realizes, as you do not, how very lucky you are. I have given you riches others only dream of, everything any woman could ever want. You have never done physical labor. You have been spoiled, Yuen Ming. Only the finest dresses, more silver than any other Mandalorian. Do you not see the envy of the other women around you? Would you prefer to be a slave? Because I can arrange that very easily," he threatened.

As he spoke, Ming reached up to absently finger her silver earring. Perhaps he had given her any material thing she could have ever wanted, but what about the truly important things? Freedom, kindness...love? She shook her head decisively as he continued his lecture, a worthless cacophony of lies. She was a slave. A slave to his whims. She felt her delicate earring, a gift of his deception, and she wrenched it out of her ear, ignoring the sudden sharp pain, and the blood that began to well in the piercing.

The emperor halted his speech in bewilderment as his daughter held her glittering earring high in front of her. Without a word, she dropped it to the cold marble floor and stamped her foot down on it, crushing its fragile twisting shape into an ugly mess.

Ming slowly raised her chin and looked her father in the eyes as his face flushed to a remarkable shade of crimson.

With an inhuman roar, he seized Ming's braid and savagely wrenched her out of his office. He dragged her up three stories of winding stairs, and threw her into a room she had not seen for seven years. He slammed the door and Ming heard the click of its lock, just before Yuen bellowed, "Stay in there forever!" and stormed away.

Ming looked around her old nursery, now completely devoid of anything unnecessary, especially anything she could use to stage an escape again. She sat on the sheet-less bed, and cried angry tears, hating her father, and cursing herself for not listening to all those who had been right about him.

* * *

><p>She was still crying, though quietly, when she thought she heard a noise by her window. Blinking away her tears, she rose and approached the window. As she grew near, something small and hard collided with the strong glass pane, and Ming jumped back, startled. Intrigued, she pushed open her nursery's window and leaned out.</p>

Below, on the beach once used for army training, stood Rah Cai Yue, a stuffed bag strapped to his back, rope slung over his shoulder, and small rocks in his hand. The sight of him brought an instant smile to her lips; she had not seen him in a year, and she had missed his company dearly.

He called from below, quoting Shakespeare fluidly in his typically broken English,

_...wond'ring eyes

>Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him
When he bestrides the
lazy puffing clouds
>And sails upon the bosom of the air.

_O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
>Deny thy father and refuse they name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be
but sworn my love,
>And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

She answered him playfully, and then said in Mandalorian, "Just what
are you doing here?"

"I'm rescuing you!" He unslung the rope and threw to her the ball he
had strung on one end. "Tie it to something and I'll come up."

She glanced around the sparse room, but she could see that there was
nothing to tie it to. Even the mattress of her bed lay directly on
the floor. She returned to the window. "There's nothing to tie it
to!"

"Well, then," answered Cai Yue, grabbing the rope. "Brace yourself
for I'm coming up anyway." He began to haul himself up, and Ming
braced herself against the window, leaning back to counter his
weight.

He turned out to be a rather good climber, and in no time, he grabbed
the windowsill and dragged himself over into her old nursery. Ming
blew on her raw hands as Cai Yue pulled up the rope and coiled it by
her window.

"It's nice to see you again," he said. "Too bad you'll be gone again
in a few minutes."

"What's all this?" she asked, opening his bag.

"First of all," he answered, digging through it, "a pair of pants and
a shirt for you to wear, to make it easier to run. You can't go by
the stables this time and take my mother's horse because they're
guarded."

"I'm not sure I want to wear this shirt," she said looking at the
bright fabric.

He looked slightly hurt. "That's one of my favorite shirts. But
anyway, I'm going to need a dress. I looked through my mother's, but
she didn't have any like most of yours."

"Unfortunately, this is the only one I have right now." Ming pulled
at the silk of the one she was wearing.

"That would be a bit of a problem." He paused. "Well, I'll turn
around and you can change, and I'll have to wear the dress you have
on."

"Very well," Ming said. "Turn." She undid her sash. "Tell me now, how
did you know I was here?"

"I'm omniscient," he answered, just as a dress of thick, deep blue
embroidered silk hit him in the back of the head.

"No, honestly, Cai Yue, how did you know I was in this room?"

"Did I not just tell you that I was omniscient?"

"Cai Yue!" Another dress hit him in the back of the head, this time with force. This particular layer was a pale yellow, and cut slightly different from the first

"Ming, I'm the official palace rogue. I have connections." Another gown came, this one pure white. "For heaven's sake, how many layers do you wear?"

"Just the three," Ming answered. "Usually. And might I add that you are truly quite thin?" she added pulling on his pants.

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Are you done yet?"

"Yes." She posed for him. "So, how do I look?"

"Better than I'm going to. Your turn," Cai Yue added, drawing a circle in the air with his finger. Yet in a few seconds he approached her, holding the first layer shut. "Uhh, tie this, please?"

Smiling, Ming helped him put on the other two layers as well. "So, how does it feel to be a woman?"

"Oppressing, and I haven't even gotten to the makeup yet." He stuffed his clothes into his bag and pulled out the paint. "If you would do the honors?"

* * *

><p>Minutes later, Rah Cai Yue hung the rope out the window once more, complete in face paint, a wig, and a dress, looking not extraordinarily unlike a woman. Nevertheless, he would never fool a close observer. But even what little time he might buy, Ming needed greatly.<p>

"I still can't believe you'd do all this, put yourself in such danger, for me," Ming said, as she prepared to climb out the window.

"I'm your knight in shining armor," shrugged Cai Yue.

"Perhaps my odd friend in drag is more correct, but it is the effort that counts." She swung her leg over the windowsill. "Farewell!"

She disappeared behind the tower wall, and when he no longer felt her weight on the rope, Rah Cai Yue leaned out the window, and called affectionately after her sprinting form.

"Haste, haste, fair maiden!"

* * *

><p>Half an hour's time found Rah Cai Yue lying quite unladylike on the mattress, reading a small leather book. His parents had never been religious, but he had found himself inexplicably drawn to that one book that Emperor Yuen feared so much. And for the past few days, he had found himself pondering one verse, a verse truly not

philosophical in the least. It simply stated a historical truth, one so incredible that it sent chills up Cai Yue's spine when he thought of the implications.<p>

"After him was Shamgar, the son of Anath, who slew six hundred of the Philistines with an ox goad; and he also delivered Israel."

If such power and invulnerability were truly possible, was there any doubt to why Yuen thought this belief so dangerous to his authority?

Suddenly, he heard a click at the door and dropped the book down the front of his dress, where it was caught by the sash, forming an odd bulge. He sat on the bed and tried to look like Ming.

In stepped Kei Sa, the slight widening of her mismatched eyes the only outward sign of her astonishment at seeing the person inside was not the princess.

"Rah Cai Yue...?" she ventured, studying the imposter's facial structure.

"Yes..."

"I came to release the princess," she explained, holding up her smuggled key.

"Very nice of you. Unfortunately, I beat you to it. You truly like her enough to risk your hide for hers?"

"She has always treated me kindly. I fear I am not far ahead of her father, though."

"Well, then," answered Cai Yue, gathering his rope and bag. "We had best leave now."

But hearing footsteps in the hall, Kei Sa whispered, "Too late."

Emperor Yuen burst in, took one look at them, and bellowed, "Guards!"

6. V

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

V.

* * *

><p>To say the least, Li Wei Yong was frustrated. He looked across the field that served as the army's new training ground. It had been moved from the beach not even a year earlier, to be closer to the army's new missile silos, and to make room for expansion. The grass had just begun to sprout where the rainforest that had hugged the beach had once been. Yet looking at the trainees strewn all over the field, he thought that perhaps they needed the challenge of fighting in the sand to bring them up to par. He'd heard the Lin Kuei still

used the beach, occasionally, for that very reason.<p>

But the new soldiers' apparent lack of skill was not the only thing bothering him. His father did still expect him to be something he wasn't, but after most of his life, he was nearly used to that. No, his real problem was that now his mother wanted him to marry, and there were no girls around that he could possibly stand enough to spend the rest of his life with.

Certainly there were many girls were quite pretty, but they were all so weak and...girly. He despised the way they threw themselves at him, shamelessly, and how their priorities for getting close to him stemmed not from actually caring about him, but from the fact that he was the only son of General Li, who was essentially the second-most powerful man on Mandalore.

Find me a woman, he thought, who isn't a giggling little girl, and I'll consider marrying her.

Of course, he had met some women who weren't pathetic, but they had all been slaves. Knowing his mother, she would drop dead at the very idea of her son marrying a slave. Of course, that wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing...

The captain sighed and tried to disappear, for he could see them coming, a small group of dressed up, make-upped women, flocking toward him. That was another thing that bothered him: they flocked, like birds, and they were birds, with their skinny bird legs and pestering high voices that chirped and annoyed you to death when all you really wanted was peace and quiet.

They spotted him, destroying any hopes he had of escaping, and fighting to try and reach him first, they nearly ran across the field, disrupting countless training exercises and mobbing him.

He tried to back away, but they clustered around him, giggling and squealing and talking all at once, so that he couldn't understand a word. He pushed them away and said, "Ladies, ladies, you cannot be here."

"But why not?" asked one, and they all echoed her, like a chorus.

"You're disrupting the training. These men need to concentrate, and you need to leave."

One of them pouted, trying to change his mind. Another thing he hated, pouting.

"Out, out." He herded them away, until they finally gave up and dejectedly left, turning back every few steps to give him nasty looks or pout at him. He took a deep breath and sighed with relief, turning back to oversee the training, but he heard a voice behind him.

"Hey, Meleager! Your papa wants you."

Wei Yong turned to see who had dared to speak with such insubordination. It was Lan Yiao Nih, the same soldier he had demoted to mere guard back before the princess had run away. Had they let him back in the army when she had left? Perhaps now that she was back, he

could get the man out of his face. Certainly he was a talented fighter, but he needed to learn respect, or he would be useless to the army.

Glaring at the guard, he went to see what his father wanted.

General Li's office was spacious, but still seemed cluttered, with countless maps, battle plans, models. His father stood, examining a map, the light from his one-way window glowing on his right side, his back to the doorway where his son stood, fidgeting uncomfortably until the older man finally turned and acknowledged his presence.

"May I ask exactly why you made those women leave?" he began.

Wei Yong swallowed, dreading the conversation that was sure to come. "They were disrupting the field, in the way ofâ€" "

"When they entered, certainly they were a disruption. But where they stood with you? Certainly not. Wei Yong, you cannot ignore them and hope we will drop the subject. Your sisters have already been married. Tell me, just what in our Empire is wrong with all those beautiful women?"

"I-I don't like how weak they are," he said, stumbling over the words, "Or how they throw themselves at me, or how helpless they seem. I know they are women, and they are supposed to be inferior, but can't they retain even a tiny bit of dignity?"

"Perhaps if you would pay attention to them, they would not have to act so silly to try and get you to notice them. Either you pick one to marry, or your mother will choose for you. There is nothing wrong with any of those women. Yet if there isn't one who would be a good enough wife for you, pick one anyway, and save your mother the stress. You can always find one who is not weak to satisfy you; the messengers make exceptionally good whores."

Li Wei Yong was speechless with shock. Luckily, he didn't have to find a reply, for as he glanced out his father's huge window, he noticed a substantial disturbance. He recognized Lyn Sa, overworked and underfed, as all messengers, in the middle of the fray, shouting.

"I'll go see what the problem is," he offered quickly, dashing out the door.

The soldiers were already hurrying away in a hundred different directions, some first raiding the stables, some on foot. He saw the messenger begin to run away, and he called after her. "Lyn Sa!"

She halted suddenly and turned, seeming surprised that even knew her name, let alone called her by it, honoring her, treating her as a person rather than dirt under his feet.

"What is your message?" he continued.

"The princess has run away again. All inferior officers are to form a party of their choice of soldiers and search for her." She ran off, still giving him odd looks.

Li Wei Yong rushed to his horse, alone. What good would a large, loud search party do, anyway?

* * *

><p>He had been riding for nearly half an hour when he found her. Yuen Ming lay near a small stream, muddy and apparently sleeping.</p>

Li Wei Yong dismounted and approached her carefully. He did not see a horse besides his own anywhere around. Had she run all the way? That was impressive, for a woman. Even so, his task should not be so hard.

He got quite close to her, where she was sprawled on the bank, exhausted, it seemed. He decided his best option was to just pick her up. He reached down and grabbed her arm.

A very loud, very high shriek rang in his ears, and he found himself flat on his back on the ground, dazed and stupefied as she stumbled away. She had flipped him!

He pushed himself off the ground and walked back over to his horse, mounting the limber stallion and riding after her. The horse galloped lightly, and they easily caught up to the princess. As he passed by her, he leaned over and grabbed her, dragging her onto the horse with him.

She swung a leg up, hitting him in the ear, and they both tumbled off the horse. The princess screamed again, causing Wei Yong to shy away from the almost unbearable pitch, and she wriggled out of his grip. Perhaps this wasn't going to be so easy after all.

He whistled at his horse, which had continued to gallop for a few seconds after his passengers had fallen. Some extra rope had been tied to the saddle, and Wei Yong untied it, then sprinted after Yuen Ming's once-again fleeing form.

She glanced over her shoulder and, seeing he was still pursuing her, swerved away and tried to run faster, but her efforts were futile. The young captain was not tired in the least, and he jumped forward, tackling her to the ground. Pinning her down with his greater weight, he wrapped the rope tightly around her wrists, binding them in front of her. Sitting on her to keep her from escaping, he tied her ankles together while she beat his back with her fists.

She struggled fiercely, as he carried her to his horse, and it was with great difficulty that he swung her over the front of his saddle, securing her down by tying the extra rope that trailed off her ankles to her wrists, around his horse's girth.

Even so, she used her small amount of slack to kick and beat, leaving numerous bruises on Wei Yong's shins and his horse's ribs after the long trek back to the palace.

* * *

><p>An assertive knock came from Emperor Yuen's door. He gave his permission for the visitor to enter and was quite relieved to see that it was a Lin Kuei, Typhoon, with his daughter slung over his

shoulder. She kicked and screamed like a madwoman as Typhoon dumped her unceremoniously on a sofa, but what she saw when she looked up stopped her.<p>

On the similar sofa across the room sat Kei Sa, with her head down and Vendetta tightly gripping her arm. Rah Cai Yue sat next to her, still in a dress, and similarly held by Tempest. He flashed her a half-hearted smile, and in another situation, she might have laughed at his ridiculous get up. Instead, she slowly shook her head and whispered, "I'm sorry," though she knew neither of them would ever hold a grudge against her for getting them into such hot water, if they even ever admitted she was responsible. She didn't deserve such friends; friends who would willingly risk their lives to better hers. She closed her eyes and tried not to cry.

Emperor Yuen stood in the middle of the room, staring at each of the conspirators in turn. Finally, he turned to Rah Cai Yue. "Boy, you have ten seconds to get out of my sight before I decide to punish you as well."

Cai Yue looked at Ming, not moving a millimeter nearer to the door.

"Nine..." said Yuen.

Go! Ming mouthed, admonishingly.

"Eight..." continued her father.

Rah Cai Yue stood, clumsily bowed, and stumbled out the door, tripping on his skirts.

Yuen swiveled sharply to glare at his daughter. _You_ will stay in your room with that window barred, _girl_, he emphasized the last word, treating with as little respect as he would a slave. "You will not have any visitors or entertainment of any kind, for three days. And if you behave, you will most likely not be punished further, though I make no promises. Take her away!" He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, and Typhoon dragged Ming out the door.

"And as for you, disobedient wench!" Yuen spat, turning to Kei Sa. "I have just the thing for you." He marched out the door. Tempest and Vendetta followed, leading Kei Sa after him.

* * *

><p>The two Lin Kuei flung Kei Sa through the curved door, and, stumbling, she forced herself to regain her balance, to not fall, denying them that tiny victory. The door clanged shut behind her and she stood up straight in the darkness, pushing back her hood, she tried to see her punishment. But she could not see anything through the thick blackness, so she felt the walls, which were, strangely, curved. It was almost certainly a sphere, and carefully pacing off the distance between poles, she determined the diameter could be no more than three times her height.<p>

Minutes later, a small glow began to grow in the sphere. Looking up, Kei Sa saw a small fire above her head, directly in the center of the sphere. Vendetta was overlooking her torture personally. As the light brightened, she discovered that the entire surface of the sphere was

constructed out of curved mirrors. From the outside, it would almost certainly resemble the little silver ball of so many years before.

Her image filled every contour of the sphere, distorted and reflected a thousand times. It was enough to give her a headache. It killed her curiosity and she sat in the lowest point of the sphere, wrapping her arms around her knees, and burying her eyes away from the unbearable images. Yet she had hardly been seated a minute when there was a great groan of metal, and the sphere rolled to the right a few degrees. Kei Sa was tossed onto her side.

She struggled to her feet as the sphere changed direction, throwing her another way. She stumbled like that for hours, her sense of direction destroyed by her many reflections, in a room that spun slowly, yet erratically, lurching her off her feet, yet forcing her to remain on them.

She was delirious with exhaustion and nausea when the flickering flow of Vendetta's fire erupted into a bright, white light, and she heard a strong, melodious voice, neither male nor female, but not unlike that of the Oracle. It told her more than she could ever have hoped to know.

Watching the torture through a tiny camera, the Lin Kuei were astounded when the lens was blinded by an unbelievably bright light, and they grew quite apprehensive when, after the light subsided, the girl began to predict the sphere's completely random rotations, and easily, if wearily, stepped with them.

And Emperor Yuen grew very, very frightened.

* * *

><p>When Ming was finally freed from the confines of her room, still not being treated as a person by her father, but no longer punished, her first thought was to find her friends and make sure they were fine.</p>

As she made her way through the palace, she searched for Kei Sa, whom she was more worried about, as Cai Yue had not even been punished. Having no success whatsoever (she couldn't even find any other slaves to ask about her), when she reached the corner of the palace where Rah Cai Yue lived, she knocked on his door. His mother opened it, and almost reluctantly, let her in, giving her an odd look, as though she was not welcome. She immediately left the room, heading to the source of some very good smells.

Looking around the finely furnished parlor, Ming suddenly realized she did not know where to go. She had never been to where Cai Yue lived before, after all. "Mrs. Rah?" she asked uncertainly, approaching the kitchen.

The large woman sighed and moved away from her cooking to face Ming. She did not speak.

"Where is Cai Yue?" Ming quietly asked. His mother pointed down a hall, still not uttering a syllable to the princess. "Thank you," Ming said, bowing slightly, and hurrying down the hall.

There were two doors in the hall, one opened and one closed. A quick glance into the open room revealed it to be dark and deserted, so she knocked on the closed one. She heard a latch being undone, and Rah Cai Yue opened the door.

"Oh, come in," he said, and closed the door behind her.

"I do not believe your mother likes me very much," said Ming, sitting in the chair he offered.

"She's still kind of upset over that horse thing, even though she never rides him. She probably can't ride him; she'd end up crushing the poor animal. And then she found me with your dress and came to the wrong conclusions. I think she thinks you're some sort of evil sorceress."

"Me? An evil sorceress? I can't even call up my element, let alone use it to cause destruction."

"I know, but even if you were an evil sorceress, I'd still be friends with you."

"You're just saying that to be nice," Ming dismissed. "But, Cai Yue, why sorceress?"

"Ah, just a bit of history..." he said modestly.

Ming leaned forward. "Please tell me, Cai Yue. The Oracle told me so little andâ€"

"You met the Oracle? Now I'm jealous. I can't believe you met her! Did you speak to her?" At Ming's nod, he slumped down. "Not fair."

"She mentioned you."

Cai Yue sat up straight again. "Really? What'd she say?"

"That I should listen to youâ€"

"And you should." He grinned.

"Also that you have Gravity as your element, which is very rare."

"Yes, well, I'm special." He closed his eyes and leaned back, as though daydreaming. "The Oracle... Was she nice?"

"Cai Yue," Ming urged. "Please tell me."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. How much did the Oracle tell you about the war before the Transformation?"

"Not much. That the Demon Master caused hatred that sparked genocide."

"Well, she gave you the simplified version, then. What happened was that the Demon Master was unable to keep the violence going long enough for genocide to occur. You see, they attacked, but when there were no responses, no counterattacks, they stopped. He gave the task

to an Edenian sorceress, the mistress of deception and a succubus as well. She falsified counterattacks, destroying ships and people, then making it seem as though the Mandalorians had done it. Yet the Kitsune, Edenia's female force of justice, knew what she was doing. While they could not defeat her in battle, they could uncover her lies. The war stopped, and the Demon Master was furious. He stripped the sorceress of the necromantic powers that had kept her young and fueled her power. She shriveled up instantaneously, but the Demon Master kept her alive, to be his slave. And it has been said that later he gave her powers to the person who thought up a scheme for him to gain access to Earth, a person whom you will never guess."

"Who?"

"Shang Tsung," he whispered conspiratorially.

"No! You're just making that up."

"I'm not! I heard it from your great-great-grandmother, I swear. Are you going to accuse her of lying?"

"No, she would never."

"She was a great woman in her time," reflected Cai Yue. "It's not her fault that her descendant turned evil." He tapped his fingers on his desk for a short while, having nothing more to say, for once, just thinking of all the gaps there were left in his account of history, wondering where he could find more information. Then he remembered Ming was still there. "Oh, uhh, what did you want again?"

"Have you seen Kei Sa?"

"Ah, no. Not since your father's office. Yet she has been the subject of all the gossip for the past couple of days. She got put in the sphere, you know."

"Oh, " Ming commented, grimacing. No one was ever a pretty sight after they left the sphere.

"It seems she walked out after her day."

Ming's jaw dropped. "What?" she whispered. No one had ever survived the full day. It was a few hours as most, and then they were dragged out, unconscious and beaten.

"I can only tell you what I've heard, but I've heard that from just about everyone, including the guy who's obsessed with her."

"What? Who?"

"Uhh...never mind."

"Well then, if you don't know where Kei Sa is, do you know where the rest of the slaves are?"

"No. They were everywhere yesterday and the day before, as usual, but today they've all disappeared. It's kind of weird. The same thing happened exactly one earth year ago."

"How do you know all this?" Ming was astounded by his endless depths of useless information.

"I'm the official palace rogue. It's my duty."

Ming stood. "I suppose I should go look some more."

"Wait." Cai Yue threw her a small bundle. "Take your dress, please."

"Certainly," she said, and hurried out.

Rah Cai Yue locked the door and sat with his back against it, pulling out a small leather book.

* * *

><p>Yuen Ming had reached a bare corner of slave's quarters, still having seen no sign of her handmaiden, when she thought she could hear music, very faint snatches of a piano. She looked around, baffled. No one was anywhere near her, let alone a piano. She must be hearing things.<p>

But the dim melody continued and Ming could have sworn it was floating up from beneath her feet. She knelt down and pressed her ear against the floor, and indeed, she heard the bittersweet tune resonating through the aged wood. She pried at a loose board, and a small trapdoor opened with it, barely large enough for one person. She hesitated for half a second before she climbed down the ladder, thinking that she shouldn't endanger herself or the slaves with the knowledge of their secret hideout. But there was no turning back.

Making her way carefully through the cramped, dim corridor, Ming could not make out the words of the song, as voices had just begun to accompany it. Suddenly, it hit herâ€"it wasn't Mandalorian they were singing in, but English. She listened carefully to the words.

_Long lay the Earth in sin and error pining
>Till He appeared and thee soul felt its worth.

She rounded a corner, and came upon a sight that started her immensely. A large group of slaves, possibly nearly all of them, had gathered in one room. They sat in rows of long benches, which were divided into two large sections by an aisle down the middle. Ming started down the aisle, headed toward the raggedly constructed stairs leading up to a platform on which a large wooden cross was prominent. On the steps knelt a small figure in white.

The song changed to what would be considered a major key in human European music. Ming had studied much about different music in the opera, and much about different cultures with her brother. She had discovered that most Mandalorian music would have been considered minor by the humans. She didn't know why. It sounded happy enough to her.

_A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices
>For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

She stood at the base of the stairs, close enough to hear Kei Sa

praying aloud quietly, but fervently. She prayed for understanding, for freedom, for strength, and thanked her god unceasingly. Based upon the enthusiasm with which she whispered, Ming did not find it hard to imagine she had been there for two days.

The music changed to minor, as suddenly as it had changed before.

_Fall on your knees, o hear the angel voices.
>O night divine, O night when Christ was born.

Ming looked around at the slaves and wondered if they truly knew how beautiful their song was. She had taught Rah Cai Yue what little he knew of English herself, and he was from a wealthy family, not just a slave.

She sat on a bench in the front row, softly crying, overwhelmed by the music and the slaves' sad joy.

They finished their song.

_O night, O holy night
>O night divine.

7. VI

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

**VI. **

* * *

><p>Hua Quy Ling leaned against the wall and tried to stay awake. He was supposed to be guarding Emperor Yuen's study while he and General Li discussed important military details, and who knew how long that would take. Besides, no one was stupid enough to try and kill the emperor, and even if they tried, Quy Ling didn't care.<p>

Let them kill him, he had decided, do us all a favor.

His mind was too preoccupied for him to be an efficient guard, anyway, lost in thoughts of her.

It had been a little over two weeks since she had miraculously survived the sphere with her consciousness intact, baffling all, and sending Emperor Yuen into a frenzy of paranoia.

Quy Ling wondered what sort of power this girl could have, with such strange powers, uncanny fighting abilities, and courage to brave a full day of the sphere. Would she be the one who would free them from Yuen's tyrannical reign? Would she unite the slaves and peasants into a mighty revolt that defeated even the Lin Kuei? Would she challenge Yuen to one-on-one combat, and defeat him blindfolded? Or would it be something simpler? A small dagger thrust through his heart?

He knew that if she ever tried to attack the emperor while he was on guard, he wouldn't make a move against her. He'd be more inclined to help her, actually. A work of art like that should neverâ€"

Did something just move over there?

He looked over the area, but saw nothing, and his thoughts turned back to Kei Sa. Yet he thought he saw something move again, and still, there was nothing there. Had he lost his mind?

He shook his head and tried to clear the thought, but when it happened a third time, he scrutinized the area, absolutely exasperated.

Thereâ€"he could see it coming up from the floor and in front of the tapestries. Slight waverings, distortions. It was much like he had seen caused by the smoldering heat of Edenia's lava-rock deserts. But what was it doing in the palace?

He stared at the strange occurrence, completely mystified. Then, he jumped in shock when in the middle of the disturbance, a figure appeared, genderless and dressed in a white fighting uniform. It raised a finger to where its lips would be, underneath its white mask, mimicking a human gesture of silence.

He nodded at the warrior, raising his own finger in agreement. The figure disappeared, and the wavering air swirled through a small vent into Yuen's study, one much too small for Quy Ling to ever fit through.

What sort of ninjas were these, that they could become invisible and fit through that tiny vent?

* * *

><p>Hua Quy Ling was mostly asleep when the sun's first rays lit up the palace halls through the frequent, huge windows. A nudge jolted him out of his sleep. A middle-aged slave holding a large tray of steaming food whispered, "You had best not fall asleep on the job anymore, son. You're dead meat if anyone not as nice as I finds you next time."<p>

Still groggy, he stepped aside to let her pass. She knocked on the door, and commented. "Master likes his breakfast early after these all-night meeting, you know. We've been yelled at far too many times before." It wasn't until she opened the door that he suddenly remembered. He made a grab for her arm, but missed as she disappeared behind the door.

She took one step inside, and then screamed, the clattering of metal and china accenting her cry.

* * *

><p>The palace reacted miraculously fast. Within minutes, other guards had seized Hua Quy Ling, and he was forced to sit on one of the study's couches while the emperor's twin children watched their father's lifeless body being prodded by a doctor. The body of General Li lay across the room, equally dead.<p>

The doctor had just finished his examination when Li Wei Yong and his family stepped through the door. His mother, overly decorated with gaudy baubles as usual, shrieked and fell on the couch across from

Hua Quy Ling, fanning herself and trying not to faint. His sisters, four of them, and all older than he, began to weep, clutching each other for support and wailing that they were going to be sick.

He didn't see their problem. There wasn't even blood anywhere. The two men looked quite normal, except that they were sprawled on the floor, and they were rather blue, and their faces were twisted into grimaces of pain. Wei Yong knew enough to recognize that as a sign of a slow death. If it had been quick, they wouldn't have had time to feel the pain. That meant their necks hadn't been broken, as he'd originally thought, due to the relative neatness of the scene.

His family was without a doubt overreacting. He had seen worse during training accidents. And Yuen Jer Rod and Yuen Ming stood side-by-side with perfect royal posture, looking down at the corpses serenely, completely under control. In a way, they seemed to be sharing the hidden joy that Wei Yong too felt. He was relieved to see he was not the only one pleased at his father's death, though he didn't like the way Ming was glaring at him with her pretty verdant eyes.

"Have you determined the cause of death?" Jer Rod asked of the doctor, and agreeable man, who hesitated, shaking his head slightly before answering.

"Asphyxiation."

Mrs. Li looked scornful. "How did they suffocate in an open room?"

"I'm not sure, madam," the doctor replied, wisely choosing to ignore her hidden insults. "I only know that all the evidence indicates a lack of oxygen. I would have to perform an autopsy to be certain."

"I don't understand," commented the princess.

"Well, I'm sorry." The doctor threw up his hands. "Maybe next time I'll just make up something that fits."

"No, no, I believe you," Ming soothed. "I merely wish I knew what has happened."

"It does appear we have a witness," offered Li Wei Yong, indicating Hua Quy Ling where he sat, silent and ignored.

"Yes," said Jer Rod, clasping his hands behind his back and walking slowly to stand in front of his late father's unwilling servant.

"Surely you heard something?"

Quy Ling hesitated for a second. No, he hadn't heard anything, but as he thought of the unforgiving Vendetta, he knew that even if he was truly ignorant, it wouldn't save him. "It was not what I heard, but rather, what I saw."

General Li's daughters gasped.

"Do you mean to say, you actually saw the killer?" asked the prince.

"I think so, sir, but I cannot tell you who, or what, it was." They

didn't seem to understand, so he explained. "I was guarding as I was supposed to and I saw the painting at the end of the hall was being distorted in little waves, such as those caused by extreme heat. Then a figure appeared. It was dressed in white, though it wore a ninja-type uniform. I couldn't tell whether it was male or female, and I remember it had the deepest black eyes. It made a gesture for me to be silent, then disappeared. It went through that vent." He pointed to it, up by the ceiling.

'That vent' was too small for a child to pass through. The twins caught each other's eye, thoroughly confused.

Then Wei Yong spoke. "A disturbance...such as that...over there?" He pointed to an area just in front of Yuen's desk.

An alien voice formed in their minds. =We are here.=

Ming and Jer Rod broke their eye contact to stare at the disturbance as it faded into, not one, but five figures, all in white.

Jer Rod, always the diplomat, spoke first. "Don't be frightened," he said, raising a hand palm out. "We will not hurt you. We merely wish to know who has freed our people."

Hua Quy Ling would have registered that sentence and gained some hope for mercy from it, but he was too fascinated by the creatures in front of him.

Another alien voice took over, slightly different in tone. =We are not frightened. You cannot harm us; we cannot be harmed. You cannot kill us; we cannot be killed. We are Vyrenchi.=

Ming took a step forward, spellbound, reaching out her hand. "May I touch you?"

=If you wish,= said the original voice. =We will not harm you. We do not wish to harm you.=

She grazed the aura of the one farthest to the left and felt the energy course through her, raising the tiny hairs on her hand.

=We are Honor,= said a new voice.

"I thought you said you were Vyrenchi," she said.

"You people are all crazy," said a woman's voice, out of nowhere. Li Wei Yong's mother frowned. His sisters looked blank, as did the guards holding Quy Ling.

"Can't you see them?" asked Wei Yong incredulously. His mother shook her head slowly, regarding her son as though he were insane. The middle figure winked at him with its huge black eyes.

"Uhh...Mother," he said, feigning affection, "you've had a hard morning. Perhaps you should go get something from the kitchen. You too, dear sisters." He rounded them up and aimed them toward the door. "Oh, and we'll take care of him," he added, pushing the guards out after the women and shutting the door behind them. He turned back to the remaining fourâ€"Jer Rod, Ming, the doctor, and Quy Ling.

=We are Vyrenchi. We are called Honor.= The figure Ming was touching pointed to itself.

=We are called Honesty.= The middle figure, the first voice.

=We are called Virtue.= The fourth figure, the second voice.

=We are called Integrity.= A new voice.

=We are called Morality.= The last and farthest to the right.

"You are going to be rather difficult to distinguish from one another," commented Ming. She had not moved an inch. Honor cocked its 'head'. Then it became tinted a bright shade of green. The rest followed suitâ€"red, gold, violet, silver.

"How exactly did you kill these men?" asked the doctor in the brief silence that had fallen over the small group, unable to contain his question anymore.

=We are composed entirely of energy,= answered the one now silver, Virtue. =We entered their bodies, stopped their lungs.=

"Why not their hearts?" asked the princess, rather morbidly.

=Too quick. Best when Evil suffers.= That was Morality, violet.

Without a warning, all the Vyrenchi disappeared. Ming retracted her hand sharply, as though burned. "They left!"

A quartet of Lin Kuei kicked down the unlocked door, without bothering to try the handle. Three hauled Quy Ling off the couch. Vendetta spoke. "We are trying this traitor. Do not dare try and stop us if you prefer your pharynx intact."

They dragged the boy into the pandemonium of the palace, random fear, anger, and joy.

* * *

><p>=We wish to protect Yuen Ming,= said Honor, and the other four Vyrenchi were startled at his odd, independent thought.<p>

They had left the palace to avoid the evil Lin Kuei and now they hung in the blackness of space, amazed at Honor's individuality.

=We do not approve,= said Integrity, and its sentiments were echoed by thousands of others from their home planet.

=We were to destroy the evil and leave immediately. We are late in returning.= That was Virtue.

=Late, late...= echoed the Population.

=We did not find the desperate girl who called us with her mind.= Honor tried to persuade them to allow him more time.

=A secondary goal, only. We should return now,= said Honesty.

=Then we will return,= agreed Honor, =We will seek approval.=

=Yes,= said a myriad of voices in a chaotic wave, the Population's approval.

* * *

><p>By the time Ming and her brother arrived in the courtroom, a large crowd had already gathered and the so-called trial had begun.</p>

It was more of a shouting match. Numerous members of the Lin Kuei and high-ranking military officers condemned the poor boy simultaneously, yelling not only with anger, but with the need to be heard over both the crowd and each other. Unsurprisingly, Vendetta was prominent among them.

As Ming made her way to sit beside Kei Sa in her designated spot, she looked to the front of the room and found her answer to why the Elders did not call for absolute silence, or even quiet the din. Three of the four chairs were empty, Emperor Yuen's and General Li's, understandably. But where was Yuen Po? The only Elder seated was a senile old man, who had been old when he supported a young Emperor Yuen.

The old man finally called for silence, and Ming was relieved to see that perhaps he wasn't completely deaf, after all. But instead of calling for an orderly presentation of evidence, he said, "I have decided that Hua Quy Ling shall be decapitated for his crimes of treason."

Vendetta seemed almost satisfied.

So this is it, thought Quy Ling, as an Earth elemental ninja forced him to his feet and pushed him toward the executioner. He was to die a martyr. Perhaps someday he would be considered a hero... Probably not.

As he was marched by, he couldn't help but notice Kei Sa where she sat by the princess, who was looking very distressed. Kei Sa herself looked merely resigned, and she closed her eyes as though she did not want to see his execution, blotting out the only true color she had besides her pink lips. The pallor of her skin nearly matched the pure shade of the princess's painted face beside her.

He was slightly disappointed that she did not seem more melancholy that he would soon be dead. He hoped it could be attributed to the fact that she rarely showed much emotion over anything, but what reason would she have for being upset? He had never even spoken with her. And now he never would.

He cursed his own stupidity as they shoved his head down on the block. His executioner raised the axe.

"Stop this at once." The unmistakable voice of Yuen Po rang through the room. She walked to her seat and as she passed Ming and Jer Rod she whispered, just loud enough for them to hear, "I am sorry I did not arrive sooner, but I could not rush. It is still very early and I am a very old woman."

She sat in her designated chair and assumed command. "I will not allow you to kill this boy without a fair trial. Now, what is his crime?"

Vendetta stepped forward. "Madam, he was guarding the emperor's door when the assassins came. He did not raise an alarm, run to get help, or even try to stop them. I believe he may have even wanted our emperor dead."

"We all wanted our emperor dead," she replied coldly, sweeping her arm around to indicate the royal family, the slaves, the civilians in the crowd. "He shall not be punished for allowing his tormentor to die. In that, he has set us free."

"But Madam," Vendetta protested, hovering on the fine line that separated his controlled anger from mad rage. "This boy is a traitor to his emperor and cannot be trusted!"

"No," countered the old woman. "It is the Lin Kuei who are the traitors, not to the emperor, but to the Mandalorians people, those who truly matter. From this moment on, the Lin Kuei are officially disbanded, and anyone who is found wearing their insignia or even speaking the name shall be tried for treason. Out of my sight!" She waved the ninjas away. They left, reluctantly at first, then more quickly when they realized she was serious and they had little time to get out of their uniforms.

"You will be in charge, then?" called a civilian from the crowd.

"No," said Yuen Po, "I am too old. I will likely die soon. I hereby give command of the Mandalorian Empire to Yuen Jer Rod and Yuen Ming."

"What is your first order of business?" asked another citizen of the twins.

Yuen Ming looked to her brother, and through his eyes, through their hidden communication link, she saw he agreed with her thoughts. "We shall free the slaves."

From somewhere in the crowd, a slave woman ran forward and knelt before them. It was the messenger, Lyn Sa. "Please," she asked, "Let this be my last message."

"Certainly," said Jer Rod. Lyn Sa cartwheeled and skipped out the door, racing to spread her joy to the others.

"I also think," continued the new king, "that before we become ensnared in affairs of state, we should all go and celebrate this joyous day." The crowd cheered and swarmed out the door.

Except for one person. Rah Cai Yue rushed up the stairs to Ming. "Is the new queen," he ventured, "too high to be escorted by an ordinary fellow like me?"

"Certainly not," said Ming, smiling and taking his arm.

Together they walked down the steps and out the door, to the jubilant

parade that had already begun.

8. Part 2: Restoration, I

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

Part 2:

>Restoration
>Twenty-Eight Years Before MK1<p>

I.

* * *

><p>It was a chilly night in Silver Coast, Mandalore.<p>

The last brilliant rays of the sun had reflected off the rolling sea and disappeared into the night long before Mandalorian Queen Yuen Ming emerged wearily from her bathing room, cloaked in the simple white linen dress that served as her sleeping clothes. Without a conscious thought, she mentally activated the sunstones that dotted the high ceiling of her bedroom and collapsed onto her bed.

She fumbled for her hairbrush, lacking the will to rise again. Yet she forced herself to sit up, tucking her chilled feet underneath her in order to warm them. The marble floors of the palace were frigid: a sure sign that winter was quickly approachingâ€"far too quickly, in her opinion. She would, as always, miss the abundant plant-life come winter.

Ming pulled the brush through her thick black hair. Or tried to at any rate. Her hair reached nearly to the covers on her bed from her sitting position, and consequently it tangled frequently and untangled with great difficulty. Kei Sa had always brushed it carefully and gently in the past, but now Kei Sa was no longer Ming's handmaiden. She spent all her time at her post in the army training fields, working with the new recruits on the basics of defense.

She missed Kei Saâ€"not just her help, but her ever-cool-headed advice, and, most importantly, her friendship.

It had been a busy month: her first as queen. Without Yuen Po's steady guidance, Ming doubted she could have survived. And she knew that the work was not going to get any easier for a very long time, if ever. It had almost let up a bitâ€"just a bitâ€"but then the Vyrenchi had again appeared. They insisted that they speak with her. Not her brother, not her great-great-grandmother. Her. They accepted Ming and Ming alone. Luckily, they were not hard to please, for they were very eager to please her. The emissaries had returned to their planet to more clearly communicate with their people until all agreed on the terms of an alliance. Vyrenchi ways and logic were strange to Ming, and she could not begin to estimate the time it would take to acquire such unanimity. However, a secure alliance was imminent, and with their power, the Vyrenchi would undoubtedly double the security the Mandalorians could provide the other planets in their makeshift alliance.

Ming was finally making some progress in her hair when there was a

playful knock at her door. She set her hairbrush on a table and hurried through her passages to answer it before she froze her feet.

As soon as she opened the door, a pair of hands reached in, seized her arm, and pulled her outside. She twisted her arm away and automatically reached up with a kick, but the kick was deflected and the hands grasped her shoulders, spinning her and wrapping a solid arm around her neck.

"All right," a male voice rasped behind her ear, "you're coming with me."

The queen stepped on her attacker's foot, and wrenched her elbow into his stomach. He grunted, a satisfying noise, but rather than being thrown off-balance and releasing her, he grabbed her wrist and elbow, twisting the arm behind her back and applying just enough pressure to make the position uncomfortable and prevent Ming from resisting further, lest her arm snap.

"Ming," admonished the voice, now devoid of its disguise and utterly familiar, "don't you even remember your best friend? It's only been a month."

"I'm sorry, Cai Yue," she breathed, mortified at having elbowed him in the stomach, "but I'm not accustomed to being pulled out of my chambers in the middle of the night. May I have my arm back?"

"It's the beginning of the night, and no, you may not." He did, however, gingerly untwist it from behind her back. "We're going on a walk, come on."

Ming looked stricken. "Cai Yue! I cannot go out in my nightclothes!"

"You're fully dressed! Contrary to your royal-lady training, you do not need to be wearing three layers in order to be decent. Come now, let's go." He pulled her forward, but she resisted, stiffening her legs, and leaning back.

"I need shoes."

"No, you don't. Come on." He pulled harder, and wrenched her forward, breaking her resistance.

"Cai Yue, I need shoes."

"Is there an echo in here?"

Ming sighed, giving up. "Where are we going?"

"It's a secret." He continued half-dragging her forward, a barely restrained smile threatening to take over his face.

They trekked through the endless halls of the palace. Ming suspected he was trying to destroy her sense of direction—rather successfully. They had been walking for nearly fifteen minutes and her feet felt close to becoming blocks of ice when she finally realized where they were.

"Are we going to the opera?" she asked, smiling slyly and raising an eyebrow.

Rah Cai Yue stopped in his tracks, dropped his head, and threw Ming's arm down against her body. "You weren't supposed to guess. Now you've ruined it all."

"Well, I could play along and pretend to be surprised when we get there."

"It won't be the same." He crossed his arms and turned away.

"Mr. Rah," she started in her most authoritative voice, "if you brought me all the way out here in the middle of a freezing cold night while I was in my nightclothes with no shoes for no reason, I am going to be severely displeased."

He dropped his arms and bowed respectfully. "Very well, Your Righteousness. We shall continue our quest." He marched ahead of her like a royal parade, and in a few minutes, they arrived at the entrance to the grand auditorium that was the opera.

Ming reached to open the door, but he gently deflected her hand.

"My Queen, I must enter first and scour the area for hidden assassins to ensure your safety."

"Oh, really."

"Don't you trust me?"

The young queen raised her eyebrows.

"Very well. But someday I will prove my utmost devotion to you, my beautiful ruler." He kissed her hand and then, opening the door slightly, slid in.

Yuen Ming covered her face with her hands and slowly shook her head. "I associate myself with this character?" she asked the walls.

Less than five minutes later, the elaborately engraved door swung open silently with Rah Cai Yue's proclamation of, "All clear, Ming."

"I see we've dropped the knight-in-shining-armor act," she replied, stepping through the entrance into the soft, golden light of the opera's sparse sunstones.

Cai Yue ignored her, pushing the door shut with his shoulder, careful to ensure that Ming did not catch a glimpse of the object he held behind his back—an object that required both his hands to hold it steadily hidden.

"Now what is this all about?" Ming asked, sitting in a nearby seat and wrapping the extra fabric of her skirt around her feet to warm them.

In one fluid motion, Cai Yue swept the package from behind his back and bowed, holding it out for her to take. It was a medium-sized black rectangular case, solid but covered with tough fabric. She

quietly undid the latches and opened the lid.

Inside lay a flawless violin, carved from a rich, dark-colored wood.

"Cai Yue," Ming breathed, then stopped before she added, 'How did you know?' This unexpected gift was an answer to a longtime dream that she had never expressed. She had always wanted to play the violin, but she knew there was no way her father would ever let her. He had thought she was already too involved in the opera. Playing a musical instrument on top of singing, acting, and acrobatics would be blasphemy as far as he was concerned, and she had been too scared to ask, just to see if there were some chance he would ever be lenient. Her father had always frightened her, and by the time she had learned to stand against him, she'd had no extra time to think about the violin. But now, Emperor Yuen was long gone, and Ming would make time.

And somehow, Cai Yue had known. He had, truly, always been far more perceptive than she'd given him credit for.

Setting aside the case and its beautiful contents, Ming stood and hugged her friend tightly. "I missed you, as well."

* * *

><p>The next morning dawned bright and warm, and the citizens of Silver Coast greeted the tiny heat wave with open arms.</p>

Yuen Ming found herself with the irresistible longing to bask in the warm sunlight and spent most of her morning in the courtyards, walking, admiring the various plants and trees, and practicing her new violin skills. She'd had no trouble finding a teacher who would set up lessons on such short notice, and on an odd schedule like hers. Indeed, there were times she enjoyed her royal privileges.

Near lunchtime, as a cool, refreshing breeze swept through the courtyards intermittently, perfecting the temperature every few seconds, Ming recognized her great-great-grandmother making her way to the secluded corner Ming had claimed, followed by a young servant with a tray.

"Gorgeous morning, is it not, Grandmamma?"

"Absolutely, my dear child," answered Yuen Po, seating herself in a chair next to Ming. The servant poured them both small cups of tea, then bowed swiftly. Ming nodded at her, and the servant went on her way, returning to the kitchens.

"You look lovely, today," started the old woman.

"Why thank you, Grandmamma." Ming's hair had been braided and then looped into a decorative knot that clung to her head, pinned in place with silver prongs accented with creamy white pearls. She wore one of her favorite dresses, a simple dark blue gown with a high waist, reminiscent of those of Earth's medieval period.

"Quite lovely. Fitting for the banquet tonight...or for a future bride," Yuen Po stated, almost casually.

Ming's heart jolted into double-speed as a chill ran up her spine. The cup of tea from which she had begun to sip fell from her grasp, shattering on the cobblestones. Hearing the crash, a servant ran across the courtyard, desperate to clean the mess.

Ming looked at her great-great-grandmother in disbelief.
"What?"

"You are to be married, my child." Yuen Po sipped her tea.

"Grandmamma!"

"My child, it is essential. We have recovered from a terrible dictatorship. The Mandalorian people are uneasy. Their lives seem unstable. It is your duty to serve the Mandalorian people to the best of your ability, and the Mandalorian people need to be shown that everything is normal, and they can proceed with their lives. You, my dear, are a very public figure. If you can be shown to be secure enough in the future for marriage, then the people will relax."

"Grandmamma...Jer Rod can be married," she said, desperation straining her voice. "Please, Grandmamma, not me."

"Ming, no one asked to marry your brother."

Ming began to understand. "There has been a proposal? Who?"

"Li Wei Yong. He was very eager, and he is a good match for you."

Ming was slightly surprised by the news. She had been around the young military leader quite often, even before he was promoted to General of the Army after his father's death. Many had scorned the decision to promote Wei Yong into such a spot, but there had really been no other choice. The high-ranking officers had all been strictly loyal to the late General Li and Emperor Yuen. The younger Li had been by far the most capable of the lower officers, and had inherited his father's tactical skill. He was essentially the fourth most influential Mandalorian on the planet, less important than only the Yuens.

"My sweet child," continued Yuen Po, "I understand that this is a shock. I ask only that you spend more time with him and consider him as a suitor."

"Grandmamma, I don't even like him!"

"Ming, dear, you haven't ever given him a chance."

"I don't want to."

"Now you're acting like a spoiled child. Dear, time is all I require of you. What else have you to do?"

Ming sighed and kicked at the ground. Engagement was a terribly huge step, but Ming felt herself already warming to the idea of spending more time with the young General Li. She still blamed him for

spoiling her second escape attempt, but this was an excellent opportunity to make him feel awful about his mindless compliance with orders. Besides, what she had seen of him revealed him to be an amusing person, his inane sense of humor as hilarious as it was annoying. And after all, he was very easy on the eyes.

"Only consider him, and spend some time with him..."

"Yes, my child."

"Very well," Ming acquiesced, slowly shaking her head at her lack of will. "If I must."

* * *

><p>"Mother!" Rah Cai Yue called from his room for the third time. "I need your help. Please?"<p>

"I'm working now. You can wait." Mrs. Rah shook her head and continued to wash her dishes.

"Mother..." he whined. "I'm going to be late!"

The hefty woman sighed and dried her hands on a dishtowel nearby. "What is it?" she asked, unenthusiastically plodding toward her son's room.

"I need your opinion. What should I wear?" He flung open his closet doors to reveal the garish collection assembled within.

The wealthy woman crossed her arms. "I was under the impression that I had a son, not a daughter."

"Mother!" Cai Yue cried, yet again. "I'm dying here. My shirts are all too bright."

"Who's fault is that?"

"Mother!"

"You have black pants, do you not?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Rah walked across the hall to her bedroom, snatched one of her husband's simple black dress shirts, and tossed it at her son. He took one look at it and said, "This is boring."

"It's suave. You asked my opinion, now get going."

* * *

><p>Ming peeked out from behind her curtain at the near-chaotic arrivals. The banquet was huge, meant to celebrate an entire month of freedom, and the people were still jubilant, reveling in their peace and making up for lost time.<p>

She had taken her great-great-grandmother's advice to heart, and wore the same dress and hairstyle she had sported earlier, the only addition to which was the compulsory white face paint, navy blue line

of eye make-up, and deep red lipstick. She hated the paint; it was sticky and it made her face feel strange when she showed any sort of facial expression. In fact, she had decided she was forced to wear the make-up to ensure that she couldn't scratch or rub her face and to compel her to keep a straight, serious countenance, rather than because of any tradition. However irritating, though, it added significantly to her prestige, and a small, young woman like Ming needed aid in that area.

The guests finally began to settle down and take their assigned seats, and Ming's anxiety began to grow. As she continued to watch the banquet out of her curtain, wringing her hands, and trying to force herself to stand still and not pace, she found her eye drawn inexplicably to an entering guest. She didn't recognize the man, of medium height and slim build, wearing a simple, yet elegant black outfit. Whoever he was, he was certainly among the best looking of the young men present, and yet, though she could not remember having seen him before, he was strangely familiar.

Her eyes trailed him as he walked quickly by the tables, craning his neck to get a better view of the place cards. He seemed to find whatever name he was looking for, and hurried through the narrow aisles that separated each table, skillfully dodging the other guests as they hurried for their seats as well. He stopped at one of the center tables, and sat in...Rah Cai Yue's chair?

Ming blinked twice, squinting to get a better look at his face. Yes, that was Cai Yue. How odd. Where was his bright shirt? And most disquieting, had she ever thought of him as attractive before?

She shook her head to clear the strange aberrant notions. It was nearly time, after all.

* * *

><p>The royal family entered the banquet with the expected formality. Yuen Po entered from the center, accompanied by a new march written for the new sovereign. The twins entered from opposite sides of the platform, bowing respectfully to their great-great-grandmother in unison before taking their seats beside her.</p>

The former din of the chattering guests quieted to an occasional clatter of dishes as the servants--mostly former slaves who were now paid for their work and treated far better--passed around the food, fastidiously prepared by Silver Coast's best chefs. The guests eyed their plates with anticipation, waiting in near silence for the royalty to begin to eat, and therefore allow them to.

Ming watched Yuen Po nervously, hoping that she would not be forced to speak. Her brother was skilled at speaking, and furthermore, he had important things to say. Ming felt as though all her contributions paled in comparison with his own natural leadership skills. To her relief, Yuen Po stood, and did not gesture at the twins to rise as well.

"Great people of Mandalore," began the elderly woman, "as you are all aware, tonight we celebrate an entire month of freedom from the Tyrant's reign. It may not seem to be much when you think of the few days we have been free, compared to the many years of the Tyrant's iron rule, yet when you consider all that we have accomplished for

the good of the people, it has been a grand month, indeed.

"It pleases me to announce to you tonight that we have another reason for celebration. I stand before you to announce that Her Righteousness, Queen Yuen Ming, and our very own Head Commander of the Army, General Li Wei Yong, are engaged to be married."

Sitting just beside Yuen Po, Ming involuntarily stiffened in her seat as the unprecedented betrayal plunged into her heart like an icy dagger. Doing her best to breathe, she dragged her eyes along the crowd of guests, trying not to show her distress.

Li Wei Yong sat near the middle, in the front, as befitted an honored guest. He met her gaze with his dark gray eyes, a smile spreading on his handsome face. Certainly he was a likable fellow, and she had no reason to dislike him, but marriage? She hardly knew him. What had her great-great-grandmother done to her?

Ming briefly closed her eyes, breaking their eye contact. Sweeping her gaze down the row, she was halted at the sight of Rah Cai Yue, sitting in the mirrored seat of Wei Yong, the same place on the opposite side of the room.

His head hung low over his plate, the bangs of his not too short, but far from long hair falling in his face. As though sensing her stare, he slowly raised his head, the indigo highlights and vague violet tint to his dark eyes scarcely noticeable from the distance. Staring straight into them, and trying to convey without speech a reassuring message of her lack of approval, Ming could not help but notice that his eyes seemed shinier than usual...

And just how did she know every detail of his eyes, anyway?

With her peripheral vision, Ming noticed that Kei Sa was sitting just next to Cai Yue. She forced herself to look away from him, to see Kei Sa's expression of justifiable concern. Everyone else seemed happy, and she felt herself detesting them for not realizing her distress. But how could she expect them to? They didn't know her, really. They pretended to know her, and criticized her like they knew her, but they had never met her, never spoken with her, for the most part.

Yet her great-great-grandmother knew her, and her feelings on the matter. What was going through her head; what thoughts would cause her to ignore Ming's opinion on a matter that more than concerned her?

Her brother knew her, and he seemed to be as surprised by Yuen Po's behavior as Ming was. From her skeptical look, Kei Sa understood Ming's feelings of betrayal. And Cai Yue seemed morose, but Ming felt he wasn't considering her. All others seemed to spread the joy she could not feel, indulging themselves in the affairs of public figures.

Noticing a great movement disrupting the stillness, Ming's attention was drawn to the area in which her best friends were sitting. To her astonishment, Cai Yue stood, insolently neglecting his untouched food and walking away, out the door. A low murmur spread through the other guests, in reaction to his inconceivably rude behavior.

Yuen Ming blinked twice, and started to rise, but she felt a cold hand clutch hers firmly. Somewhere in the midst of Ming's panic, Yuen Po had sat. She looked at Ming sternly, silently telling her she would not be allowed to duplicate her friend's courtesy.

Ming turned her head away from the older woman in shame, and felt the gnarled old hand release her. After a few seconds of silence, the dining hall was filled with the indecipherable murmurs of conversation, the clinks of glasses, and the scrapes of knives against porcelain plates. Yuen Po had taken the first bite, signaling the guests that they were allowed to eat.

But Ming did not wish to eat. The savory scents wafting up from the expensive delicacies on her plate made her nauseous, rather than intensifying her appetite. The unthinkable deception on her grandmother's part left her feeling ill, and yet, she was the role model, the queen, the mannequin of proper Mandalorian life.

She gathered a lady-sized bite of spiced noodles, and willfully forced herself to swallow them.

It was to be an unbearably long, deplorable celebration.

* * *

><p>The young queen closed the door softly behind her and exhaled a faintly audible sigh, relaxing her rod-straight posture. She slumped against the door of the tower, dropping her head to stare at the ground, her hand pressed to her forehead as though it could halt the whirlwind of unwelcome thoughts in her head.</p>

The rustling commotion of the crowd's dispersion echoed through the solid wood of the door, and Ming was relieved to finally be free from her public restraints. It was essentially her tower; she could all but walk about in the hall wearing only her underclothes. She dropped her hand, and, noticing the white face-paint that had been smeared on it, sighed once more. Hoisting her skirts with her other hand, she started up the stairs.

At the top of the last flight, she slipped off her shoes and tucked them under her arm, disregarding the chill of the floor, wholly ready to drown her troubles in slumber. She lifted her line of sight to measure the last few steps leading to her room, and started, involuntarily jumping back a fraction of an inch.

A man was slumped against the wall, his head hung low, dressed in a familiar black outfit.

"Cai Yue?" she whispered.

He looked up from his trance, and stood suddenly. He was in bad shape, the disheveled ghost of the happy young man he had been a few hours before. Taking a step forward, Ming noticed the two shiny trails staining his face, and stopped once more. "What's wrong, Cai Yue? I've been worried."

He forced a twisted half-smile. "Congratulations," he said contemptuously.

"Are you okay?" Ming took a hesitant step forward.

Her friend mirrored her movement. "I guess this is the only time I'll ever get to do this."

"Do what? Cai Yue, what are you talking about?"

And then he kissed her.

Ming took a reflexive step backwards, stunned.

Cai Yue forced a bitter laugh, wiping the queen's red lipstick from his mouth. As Ming's frozen brain tried to come back to life, he collapsed to his knees, having lost his barely retained composure.

Yuen Ming swallowed hard, and stepped away. "I'm sorry, Cai Yue, but I had no choice. It is not my fault."

Closing her eyes, she turned away, leaving him alone and rejected in the hallway, and stepping into her room, where the indomitable call for sleep and thus, she hoped, peace awaited her.

9. II

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

II.

* * *

><p>Mandalore's winter, though distinctive, was never severe. Even on the coldest of days, the army trained outside, though the recruits were more appreciative of their heavy uniform dress on the cold days than they were on the warm, stuffy summer ones.<p>

Rubbing his hands together as he issued another command, Hua Quy Ling reflected that it was far less warming to be the instructor than the student. He remembered wishing he could shed a few layers even during the winter when training under Vendetta.

Over the ocean, the sun had reached its most annoying pointâ€"exactly eye-levelâ€"and Quy Ling knew it was time for the lesson to end. He ended it quickly and dismissed his students, watching to ensure they stored their mock weapons in the proper places, and listening intently to their conversation. After only one month teaching the basics of weapons to the rookies, he had noticed that those who complained the most, especially about trivial things such as the weather, were the first to drop out. He'd rather not waste his efforts painstakingly correcting those who didn't have the perseverance or dedication to develop their skills.

He courteously nodded to the last of the students leaving, waited half a second, and dashed out the other door.

Halfway across the training field, he could see that she was still on duty. She taught the basics of defense, one of the many other courses the new recruits were rotated through for their basic training before they branched off into their personal areas of

expertise.

The top half of Kei Sa's ebony hair was pulled up into two thin braided pigtails that whipped around as she spun, evading her student's attack in demonstration. She wore a long-sleeved, button-down, white dress that opened in order to allow a large range of motion. It parted just below her waist in the front, revealing her white shorts underneath. The two flaps of her dress fluttered and twirled with every kick, making her naturally graceful movements seem even more like a dance than they did under normal circumstances.

Quy Ling treaded resolutely toward her as she wrapped up the day's lessons and ended her class. She smiled at the students as they left, encouraging them effortlessly, and he stepped up beside her. She turned to leave, and seeing him in her path, sighed.

"Won't you leave me alone?"

"No." He stubbornly stood his ground, and she pushed around him, doing her best to ignore him.

Kei Sa hurried away, more hastily than usual, and he fell into step behind her. As they entered the palace, Quy Ling immediately noticed her slight course changes, noting that she was not heading toward her quarters. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"_I_ am going to visit a friend," she answered flatly.

He felt a sudden flash of envy. Was she ignoring him only to seek out a suitor elsewhere? Was he being shunned? Was he too pushy? Did he annoy her? Did she hate him?

He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. She was most likely visiting some female friend of hers to discuss girly things.

And yet, that was not at all like her.

"Is this a male friend?" he asked, trying to hide his suspicion.

"Is this your business?" She did not sound amused, sharply turning a corner as though attempting to lose his pursuit.

Quy Ling recognized the section of the building as one of the areas that had been reassigned to the slaves when they'd been freed. His own quarters were only a few halls away. Kei Sa stopped abruptly and opened a door without knocking, as though it were her own. A glimpse inside the room revealed it to be an untidy mess of electronic parts: wires, batteries, small motors, microchips, and other such junk.

"Yen Sa?" called Kei Sa into the room, a decidedly male name. "I need your help."

She took one step into the room, and deliberately slammed the door in his face. He heard the click of a lock a split-second later, and tried the knob to be sure.

In frustration, he pounded his fist on the doorframe and stormed away.

* * *

><p>A few straggling trainees, as they were passing by the royal stables on their way to their quarters, heard the scratching sounds of a novice's attempt at the violin. The sound faintly carried across the field, originating deep inside the stables near a noble ebony stallion.</p>

Yuen Ming's violin moaned a few notes, and then its player leaned toward her stallion and whispered, "Maybe I should just run away again. Royalty is not all it's hyped up to be."

Sighing, she tucked her precious instrument under her right arm and reached up to rub her horse's forehead. "I wish you could give me advice. I have no one to turn to. I wish I could ask Kei Sa, but she just got free of problems. It would be wrong of me to impose them upon her again."

A sharp creak jolted her out of her own little world, and she whipped her head around to see the intruder.

He was an extremely old man, in flowing robes, with a long beard and mustache. "Do you always give free concerts to your livestock?"

Ming fixed a stern gaze on the man. "You are not welcome here, Shang Tsung. I command you to leave at once, or I will call the army to have you permanently removed from this world." She stolidly raised her violin into play position again, and began a simple slow song that she had taught herself.

Tsung grimaced. "Now I know why. Anything intelligent would try to flee from this infernal racket."

Ming shot him a glare that would melt the arctic.

"Peace, peace, woman," he said, raising his hands pacifically. "I know we were at odds before, but I mean you no harm. I merely thought it strange that one so vehement to arranged marriage in the past, is now meekly accepting it."

"I am warning you, Tsung," she harshly replied. "One scream and you will be surrounded by a hundred armed guards."

"I doubt they would reach me in time. Farewell, fair queen." He bowed in a mocking gesture and vanished.

Ming raised her bow and prepared to start her song again, but her hand quivered, and she burst into frustrated tears.

* * *

><p>Yuen Ming sprinted down the marble hallways, past the kitchens, and into an area of well-worn rugs and shabbier decorations, where the marble of the doorframes was chipped from abuse.</p>

She tried to ignore the feeling that she didn't belong, and frantically searched for Kei Sa's door number. Her door looked no different from the rest, but unlike the situation for the rest of the former slaves, these quarters were not many times better than Kei

Sa's former living accommodations. A room in Ming's vast chambers was painfully empty, and Ming wondered if Kei Sa was truly satisfied with her new arrangements.

She knocked on the door, but there was no answer. A few seconds later she impatiently rattled the handle, but it was locked. "Kei Sa?" she called through the door, struggling to keep back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her like a tidal wave. She pounded on the shabby door. "Please, Kei Sa!"

"What is it, my queen?" said a quiet voice behind her, startling her and causing her to jump around to face it.

Kei Sa looked unperturbed by the queen's behavior; yet she always seemed unshakable.

Ming brushed away the saltwater gathering in her eyes. "Kei Sa, I..." She trailed off, unsure of how to phrase her problem, or even exactly what her problem was.

"Yuen Po is not a tyrant," said Ming's former handmaiden. "Perhaps you should speak with her." She stepped forward and unlocked her door, then paused. "You will speak with her?"

Ming nodded slowly. "In the morning," she said.

Kei Sa smiled faintly, then entered her room.

* * *

><p>The next morning, Ming stumbled across her rooms, clumsily pulling on her shoes, and tying her sash with shaking hands.</p>

She had rehearsed her words a thousand times in her mind, throughout the sleepless night and the restless hours of morning before Yuen Po typically emerged from her chambers, but her carefully constructed arguments were unraveling themselves in her mind, falling into incoherent jumbles of worthless words.

She left the security of her rooms, wincing as she passed the spot at which Cai Yue had sat and unpleasant memories forced themselves into conscious thought. Trying to waste extra minutes, she attempted to keep her pace slow, and her stance regal, but the urgency of the situation overrode her wishes, and she found herself nearly jogging across the marble floors until she breathlessly reached her great-great-grandmother's room.

Yuen Po stepped out of her room just as Ming had passed the final corner, and expectantly waited for the young queen to explain herself.

Ming breathed hard, her voice failing her, and her planned words disappearing into oblivion. After a period of discomfiting silence, Yuen Po swung open the door.

"Come inside, my child," she said, "and we will speak." The old monarch ushered the girl into her room, furnished in warm, inviting colors.

Ming sat in an uncomfortably hard chair, and clasping her hands in

her lap, she stared at the intricate weaving of the rug. She lifted her head and opened her mouth to speak, then abruptly broke down into tears, hiding her face in her hands.

"Do you really hate him so much?" asked Yuen Po.

Ming shook her head, and wiped away her tears, her shoulders still trembling. "No, Grandmamma, I do like him. He's amusing and intelligent, and I could hardly expect anything more than what he offers." She bit her lip, forcing herself to stop validating the older woman's plan. "But...Grandmamma...I do not love him." She rubbed her eyes and stared down at her squirming feet. "Do you wish me to marry without love?"

Yuen Po sighed, and walked away. She pushed aside the curtain of her large-paned window and stared out at the sparkling ocean.

Ming's face turned incredulous at her great-great-grandmother's behavior. "Are you listening to what I say?" she asked, nearly shouting.

The old woman slowly turned to face the younger. "You do realize, my dear," she said mildly, "that I have striven to protect you since you were born. This is but another step; a large step, yet necessary." She turned back to the window, and motioned for Ming to join her.

"The ocean, as it stretches to the horizon, seems an infinite area. Yet the visible portion is a mere fraction of the populated land of Mandalore. Supposing that half the population is male, and an eighth of the men are of roughly the same age as you and unmarried, how many do you think would wed you for your position, your wealth, and your power?"

Ming looked down angrily, unwillingly conceding to the argument.

"My dear," continued Yuen Po, "we are in the fortunate position to have found a man whose position is nearly equal to yours and who has taken a fancy to you. Do you think it will happen again?"

"Even so, Grandmamma," countered Ming, "if there was truly love between us, it would not matter what his position was. He wouldn't abuse me in such a manner."

Yuen Po sighed. "Ah, the carefree ideologies of youth." She shook her head. "Love is not the all-encompassing guarantee of happiness you think it is. Ignoring all else, your mother married for love."

Ming's face twisted as she struggled not to weep. "That was cruel," she stammered, and the tears began to flow uncontrollably.

Yuen Po hugged her. "Reality is cruel." She held her great-great-granddaughter for several minutes, then released her to fetch a handkerchief.

"I shall make you a deal," Yuen Po said, handing it to Ming. "You have heard my reasoning. Your wedding is scheduled two days from now, at noon. You have until midnight to find another whom you love, and who reciprocates these feelings, and whom you can convince me is

equally as trustworthy as Li Wei Yong."

It sounded impossible. She had less than fifteen hours in which to find her true love?

But then, she remembered everything—the gifts, the constant companionship, the crying, and even the kiss—and it hit her, instantaneously enlightening her to an explanation of years of inexplicable behavior and mixed feelings.

She abruptly straightened, and regained composure. "Yes, Grandmamma, it is an excellent idea," she said cordially.

And ran.

* * *

><p>Ming knew precisely where she was headed. Never before had such a quest been so obvious. The rest of her life hung on one small chance, and she was not about to waste her only hope.</p>

She raced through the halls, dodging servants and other citizens, nearly crashing into many, refusing to halt her sprint for any person.

Finally she saw the door of the Rahs' apartment, and she slammed her body into it, the knob not turning rapidly enough for her needs.

She conquered the door and burst into their living room, standing in a fidgety silence while they incredulously stared up at her sudden intrusion.

"Where is Cai Yue?" she panted.

His mother seemed indifferent. "I don't know."

"You 'don't know'?" Ming skeptically inquired. "He's disappeared and you 'don't know'?"

"Your Righteousness," Mrs. Rah said, over politely, "he disappears all the time, and he's never been in serious trouble before."

"Yes," Ming replied, beginning to feel the threat of futility surrounding the ordeal, "but he's always disappeared with me!" She rushed out the door and slammed it behind her.

Mr. Rah slowly lowered his head to resume examining the gold market prices, and Mrs. Rah shook her head disapprovingly.

"She is most certainly a terrible influence. It's for the best that she will soon be married, and far away from our son. Perhaps Li Wei Yong can tame that girl."

Her husband nodded absently.

* * *

><p>Hours later, Ming dragged herself back to her chambers. Every step wrenched deep into her heart. It had to be a nightmare. Reality was not so harsh...</p>

Yet she knew she was awake, and that her situation was far more real than she wanted to acknowledge.

He had disappeared. Vanished. No one had seen him since the banquet. It was all tremendously hopeless; she should've known before she even tried.

Cai Yue did not wish to be found. He knew the palace more thoroughly and roguishly than even the most experienced sentry. And he was gone.

The futility of her situation overwhelmed her, and exhaustion from her search added to her weariness. She hoped for nothing more than the comfort and restoration of slumber, but it evaded her, plaintive sobs preventing its calming state.

* * *

><p>The dawn of Yuen Ming's wedding day was a joyous spectacle, reminiscent of the day of freedom, just weeks earlier. Children frolicked in the streets, waving streamers in wild patterns, their parents smiling and laughing with one another. Merchants from all provinces wove through the crowd, having pounced upon the opportunity to spread their specialties among those from other provinces, and perhaps gain global fame.</p>

The majority of the merchants were from the heavily populated Onyx Coast, easily recognizable from their brighter clothing and higher prices. The visitors from Onyx Coast were as distinctive, with nicer, more extravagant clothing than the others, some in colors that even Rah Cai Yue would shun. They had an air of casualty; for the men, it was genuine, for the women, faked, as they 'secretly' tried to outdo the others around them, and yet appear as though they had exerted no effort. Some of them exhibited such extravagance in hair and dress that they rivaled that of the queen, who sat alone at her window, listlessly watching the festivity.

Yuen Ming, soon to be Li Yuen Ming, had been pushed through her preparations like a delicate porcelain doll. Her hair had been intricately braided and twisted upon itself countless times, every weave shining with an immaculate luster, indicative of the excessive time spent merely washing her hair. Alabaster buds were dotted throughout the design, symbolizing the beginning of new life within marriage. Resting atop the crown of her head, just before the piling arrangement of sable hair, sat a silver tiara, forged for the occasion by the finest artisan on the planet.

The immense weight of her hairstyle pressed upon Ming as the personification of her every emotion. She felt restricted by her dress, bearing even more layers than usual, in ivory and gray, like a cocoon that served no purpose other than to keep her captive and display her as a mannequin. Her dried make-up painted a serene face she hadn't the strength to bear.

A quarter of an hour before noon, her servants returned, prepared to escort her to the ceremony. She glanced at them and turned away, her sluggish legs unable to move, her mind unwilling to make them. She heard gentle footsteps, like those of a bird, and a voice quietly urged from just below her, "My queen, we must leave at once, or you

shall be late."

It was not the voice of a stranger, who treated her as though she were sacred and entirely without personality. It was the voice of a friend, her companionship sorely missed.

Ming, beginning to tremble with the promise of tears, looked down toward Kei Sa, who knelt on the floor. Her thick dress was deep burgundy, the color a complete contrast to and accentuating the pallor of her face more than the pristine, lifeless white she had worn as a slave and continued to wear in her self-inflicted continuation of the tradition.

"Be brave, Ming," she whispered, "for the sake of Mandalore." Taking the queen's hands, she rose to her feet in a fluid movement, pulling the other up as well.

Ming squeezed her eyes shut and blindly followed the escort out of the tower, every step long since memorized. The noise of the crowd grew consistently until they reached the door that led to the courtyard. Kei Sa opened the door, and the din abruptly ceased, a few voices carrying over of those who had been too distracted to notice the change. She led the other servants onto the path; they formed a border, three girls on each side of the path, and knelt.

Ming opened her eyes and stepped outside, stopping between the middle set of girls. She stared at the stone beneath her feet, a short way ahead of her. The ringing of Li Wei Yong's boots on the well-worn stones invaded her ears and in a short time they came into her view, followed by his knees, and stopped.

She lifted her head, and he smiled at her. He was dressed in uniform, with freshly polished, ceremonial pieces of armor—"shin and forearm guards, chest plate"—every bit the celebrated general. His sable hair was gathered at the base of his neck, though a small chunk was too stubborn to be bound, and fell onto his face instead, obscuring a dark gray eye. He took a quick step and turned to take her arm and push her along the straight path to the church beyond.

Ming glanced at the crowds to either side without moving her head, coldly building mental barriers to block out her distress. Halfway to the church's doors she took notice of a gaudily-dressed woman, clad entirely in a revoltingly-bright shade of yellow, one that had likely found its way into several of Cai Yue's infamous shirts.

She halted at the piercing thought, providing sudden resistance to Wei Yong's firm direction, and stared at the dress, unable to control the sudden burning in her eyes.

"Hey," Wei Yong said quietly, "what's wrong?" He placed the knuckle of a curled finger under her chin and pushed it up gently, catching sight of her first tear. Concerned, he followed the direction of her gaze, noting the woman, but gaining no insight into her trouble.

"Looking at her," he said lightly, "makes me want to cry, as well. There've been supernovas less blazing. She's going to blind everyone that looks at her too long. They'll all go home with odd woman-shaped spots seared on their retinas."

Ming choked on her tears, and allowed him to guide her the rest of the way into the church.

Hundreds of loyal Mandalorian citizens watched the wedding of their queen. Yet only very few realized that the silent tears of Her Righteousness Yuen Ming were not of joy.

10. III

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

Twenty-Seven Years Before MK1

III.

* * *

><p>The dank, misty forest was silent, every stray movement amplified and ghostlike. A patrolling sentry saluted and continued his strictly defined route, as Li Wei Yong scanned the area. He scoured the tree branches from the closest supply tent to the patch of broken-down and twisted trees, leveled by a former cycloneâ€"the range a full one hundred eighty degreesâ€"all without turning his head. Finally, a nondescript clump of leaves rustled slightly, as Nai Do Xian carefully shifted position to alleviate the strain on aching muscles, and Li Wei Yong began to climb.<p>

Few were able to tolerate the long waits of inactivity that were required of snipers, and Do Xian was the best Wei Yong had ever encountered. The job required great mental and physical discipline: the patience to wait, the strength to lie still, and the attentiveness to notice everything, even after hours of dormancy. Wei Yong suspected that a main factor in Do Xian's ability was the support of his element, earth. He lay on a large branch, straddling the trunk, his crossbow, which had been redesigned with the objective of silence, steadily pointed to the forest floor below.

Wei Yong climbed to an adjacent branch. "Marvels of engineering," he said, his voiced garbled by the breathing filter built into the helmet he wore, speaking of the unique curvature of the view-plate that allowed an entire half-circle to be viewed through its narrow slit. He pulled off the helmet, examining its green camouflage paint, which matched the battle armor he wore. "Are you certain you don't want one?" he asked.

"I'm certain I don't need anything that will force me to relearn how to aim, thank you, sir," replied the other, his eyes never leaving the dense foliage below.

"One blast from that acid and you won't have any eyes left with which to aim."

"I'll have to take that chance, sir."

The general sighed. "Any sign of them?"

"No, sir. No Chiss anywhere."

A little less than a month earlier, the Chiss had inexplicably rebelled and began to randomly attack visitors to their planet. It was suspected that there had been an outside influence on their behavior, but without evidence supporting the assumption, no conclusion could be made.

The reptilian Chiss had little technology, but possessed superior instinct and cunning. Their nasty habit of spitting acidic venom had forced the Mandalorian army to dredge up antiquated battle armor. When this caused the reptiles only to refine their aim and target faces, a new helmet was commissioned, to replace that of old and protect against the acid while not restricting vision. Wei Yong had received the first experimental batch for review hours earlier, and intended to send them through 'field testing' before he replied with his critiques, immediately distributing them among the soldiers as standard issue.

"Very well," said Wei Yong. "Keep up the good work."

"Always, sir," Do Xian replied, in neither a snide nor an arrogant manner, and a grin spread on the general's face as he climbed back down the great tree.

What he saw at the bottom replaced it with a grimace. Captain Lan Yiao Nih awaited the general, his company of soldiers standing at attention behind him. His habit of insubordination had scarcely improved since the last time he was readmitted into the army. Wei Yong would have preferred to discharge him permanently, but after Emperor Yuen's and his father's death, the majority of high-ranking officers had been dismissed, and Wei Yong had been forced to accept as officers any who showed potential.

"I still can't believe I promoted you," muttered Wei Yong.

The captain ignored his remark. "A mass of Chiss has been spotted rapidly approaching camp from the west. We eagerly await your orders," he concluded with sarcastically excessive cheer.

"Set up a defensive line with the rest of the soldiers, equally spread along the entire perimeter." The exasperation in his voice outlined the unspoken remark, Do I have to tell you everything?

Yiao Nih only smiled at the silent rebuke. "Weren't you supposed to be going to Edenia tomorrow?"

"Yes," hissed the general, wishing away the captain.

"Apparently, you won't be."

"Apparently."

* * *

><p>"And you're absolutely certain it is safe?" inquired Yuen Jer Rod, prodding the rough volcanic rock underfoot with his toe.</p>

Sindel nodded. Daughter to an aging old man who became more senile with every passing day, she was the true leader of Edenia's

government. Self-assured and competent, she had led the visiting Mandalorians to the site of their soon-to-be-built embassy, awaiting approval on all plans before construction could begin. She was slightly taller than the average Mandalorian woman, though shorter than many Edenian women, naturally possessing the light skin that was characteristic of Edenia's ancient ruling class, but having carefully tanned it to the swarthy copper skin of all other Edenians.

"Considering the weight of all the equipment that has been run over the site," she said, "if it was going to cave in, it would have already. Besides, everything will be in place and tested long before we allow your people to move in. If anything happens, it will happen to us."

The planet Edenia, named in much the same manner as human explorers had once named Greenland, consisted almost entirely of bare volcanic rock, forming a sweltering desert broken only by the rare oasis, and filled with the most remarkable gems as a remnant of the former violent volcanic activity. On occasion, layers of the rock would collapse under the weight of a building, or even something as light as a person where the rock was untested, making exploration a risky undertaking.

"All this surrounding rock," continued Jer Rod, "will be smoothed, naturally, creating the exceptionally coarse sand that will fill in all other crevices." Having been tutored since childhood, Jer Rod spoke Edenian smoothly.

"Precisely," affirmed Sindel.

Jer Rod bit into a slice of the tart citrus fruit he'd been given, grown from one of the astoundingly fertile oases, and looked to his advisors for confirmation.

The architect absently glanced up from studying the plans. "It seems stable," he commented in his home language.

"Which?" Jer Rod asked, "The building or the land?"

"Both," acknowledged the geologist.

"And what does my darling, silent sister think?"

Li Yuen Ming seemed distracted, glancing to and from her brother continuously as she searched for the source of a slightly amplified voice. "I can find no fault, brother," she said finally.

"Well, then," he said, lowering his voice, and noticing her preoccupation. "If you'd like to wander the area, we don't need you, Ming."

She was silently hurt, but nodded her agreement and watched them move away, leaving her alone with her honorary bodyguard, a member of Edenia's elite group of woman fighters, the Kitsune. She was taller than Ming, firmly muscled, and dressed in a tight leather tunic and pants, nearly the same copper as her skin and the sun-faded streaks in her not-quite-black hair. Wickedly sharp teeth from an unknown predatory creature were strung across her forehead, attached to a band that served to keep her unruly hair away from her face. She wore no weapon out of diplomacy, but though the lack was noticeable, she did not seem to need any sort of aid in order to protect her.

charge.

Once again, Ming turned to the gathering of people. The voice that held them enrapt was strikingly familiar, and Ming's heart was torn between the hope that she was not correct in her identification of the voice, and the joyous hope that she was. She edged toward the Edenian crowd, noting the Mandalorians milling about them—"ladies in tidy white dresses, men in black, thick cotton coats. The idea of such a mission of the Mandalorian church was not aberrant, nor was she surprised to see one on Edenia; she had, in fact, previously known that it had come. The peculiarity of this mission lay in its unusually large, attentive crowd that grew every minute, and in the pleasant, charismatic voice that caused them to do so.

He brandished a worn, leather-bound book that she knew well, and preached eloquently with a voice she also knew well, though the language was unfamiliar. The long black coat he wore, uniform for every Mandalorian priest, was the antithesis of the brightly colored clothing that had once been his preference.

Li Yuen Ming swallowed, trying to lessen the lump in her throat. "Please," she said, turning to the Kitsune, "fetch the one who is speaking and send him to my room. I shall return to the palace immediately."

The warrior nodded, and expertly skirted the crowd, many aiding her cause by stepping aside upon recognizing the woman as one of the Kitsune. Disrespecting the rights of the speaker, the woman climbed onto the stage, her uncouth manner bewildering many, Rah Cai Yue included.

He switched off his microphone and faced the muscular woman, slightly wary that she had decided to end his teaching with violence. "Is there something you need?" he asked hesitantly.

"Her Majesty Li Yuen Ming wishes to converse with you."

Cai Yue glanced from the woman to the crowd and back several times, incredulous. "I'm slightly busy at the moment."

The warrioress raised her eyebrows skeptically. "You would cause Her Royal Highness to wait?"

"Well...yes." As the woman crossed her arms in a careless movement that insinuated his fate was of his own design, he clarified, "I'm not afraid of Yuen Ming," and flicked on his microphone to continue and try to re-gather the scattered thoughts and trust of his listeners.

Yet, if he was not afraid of his former friend, why was there a tremble in his hands and a queasiness in his stomach that undermined his concentration and diminished the impact of his words? He clumsily finished his sermon, and his unsteadiness only grew as the Kitsune escorted him into the palace and through halls in which the light of every chandelier was refracted by gems of every color and worth, giving the walls the effect of ice, as though the builders of the palace were so arrogant to build a shrine to the arctic in the heart of a desert.

The Kitsune woman halted in the heights of the guest section,

stopping beside the one visible doorway and eyeing Cai Yue with a fair amount of suspicion. After a momentary pause he jerked open the right side of the double-door and forced himself inside. Ming was standing near her window, gazing out at the infinite black rock that baked under the sun's relentless rays. She turned her head to face him, arms clasped behind her back, but upon seeing his face, a smile twisted hers and she as much as ran to embrace him tightly. He stood limp, stunned, then smiled and returned her hug.

In as abrupt a mood swing as he had ever encountered, she pulled herself free and slapped him with the force of a whitecap, sending him reeling in search of balance and comprehension.

"What right do you think you have," she demanded, her voice husky with strained emotion, far different from the clear soprano he treasured, "disappearing as you did?"

He could only blink, rubbing his face where it burned as though he'd been lashed.

"An entire year, Cai Yue," she emphasized. "I thought you'd died." She turned away, tightly closing her eyes.

He stared at the floor, searching for the words to describe his choice and his reasons. "I needed time away," he said finally. "Once I was able to think of you without the pain, it was easier not to see you. Besides," he added, speaking more to the floor in his hurt, "you had your husband."

Ming spun around and began to speak, but just as suddenly, she creased together her eyebrows and snapped her mouth shut, as though thinking better of it. She stood, facing him, but not looking at him, huddling in an insecure manner, much the same as Cai Yue. The tension gripped every molecule of air and froze it in place, denying it movement. The slightest breath seemed poised to shatter the room.

As it became apparent that regardless of anything that happened, something would have to be broken, Cai Yue blurted, "Will the embassy have emerald and sapphire chandeliers?"

Ming lifted her gaze to stare at him and the unexpected question that had surfaced. "I suppose it might." She bit her lip, searching for her own harmless question and, noticing his heavy coat, finding it. "Aren't you hot?"

He looked at her for a moment and half-smiled. "And how many dresses is Her Righteousness wearing today?"

Ming felt a flush warm her cheeks. "I missed you," she admitted.

"You always do," he said impishly, his mouth quirking the rest of the way into a smile. Ming began to laugh without entirely knowing why, as though her relief had seized control of her emotions, and Cai Yue was unable to keep from joining her.

* * *

><p>The days passed effortlessly, the Mandalorian visitors to Edenia gradually becoming accustomed to the heat, and Ming's face began to

darken into a tan that would not be easy to cover with paint when she returned to her home. She began to revel in her lack of obligations almost as much as she missed the moisture and abundant plant-life of Mandalore.<p>

She tromped down the grand staircase of the palace's main hall at dawn, dressed in a plain slate-colored dress and determined to buy a lovely gift for her great-great-grandmother and Kei Sa, even as she wondered if the former slave would even wear one of the Edenians' remarkable stones. Quietly she sang to herself the hymn Cai Yue had taught her in the most recent of his many visits.

At the bottom of the stairs, she spun in a joyous, carefree piroouette, and leapt like a dancer toward the permanently opened doors of the palace, which revealed the booths of the market outside. Despite its primitive appearance, the Edenian capital's market hosted the finest jewels that could ever be found at the lowest, most competitive prices.

Hearing a voice speaking orders in her own language, Ming halted and turned her head toward the sound, which came from the hangar. She recognized her brother's geological advisor, cautioning a worker to take care with the equipment that was being loaded into their starship.

"Are we leaving?" she asked.

The advisor looked at her sympathetically. "I think you'd better talk to your brother," he said quietly.

She turned quickly to see Jer Rod in the corner, his head drooping slightly as he watched the work. "Jer Rod," she called, "what is this?"

"I thought you were asleep," he noted.

"What's happened?"

"I think you'd better sit," he said, motioning to take her inside the ship.

"Jer Rod," she said, resisting his attempt to move her toward its opening, "tell me what has happened."

He breathed deeply. "Grandmamma has died."

Ming's thoughts halted and her breath failed her.

"What...how...?"

"Peacefully, it seems." He shook his head in disbelief. "You know as well as I that Grandmamma was a very old woman. Strong to last, she was. Nobody expected this. We're going home to mourn her immediately."

Unbidden tears began to trickle down Li Yuen Ming's face, and her mouth quivered. She looked up at her brother, only to see that his eyes were dry and his face exhibiting royally calm composure in the same manner it did in any other circumstance. "How can you be so cold?" she asked, and he was taken aback, visibly distressed by her accusation.

"I loved Grandmamma as dearly as you; you know it," he defended, then carefully lifted her chin and whispered in her ear, "Be strong, Ming. You are the queen. You must be strong."

11. IV

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

IV.

* * *

><p>The two-week battle with the Chiss had been a swift, relatively painless victory for the Mandalorian army. However, Wei Yong was not so ignorant in the way of diplomacy to express such a callous opinion in his public summary of the war. He had no wish to face the sorrowful wrath of those whose sons, fathers, husbands, nephews, or even the rare daughters, had been ruthlessly slaughtered by the reptilian forces. Polite smiles and original-sounding generic condolences were, as he had long since been taught, the path to respect and the public's approving opinion of him.<p>

He saluted his soldiers and nodded to the civilians that bowed as he passed, his eyes un-focusing themselves from fatigue as he climbed the stairs to the room Ming had insisted upon keeping. Both the carved wooden shutters and the decoratively etched glass windows were open; the crisp fall air whooshed through the room, rippling his soiled cape, and knocking a few strands of hair onto his face. He tossed his head in an equine manner to force them back and, with a great sigh, fell forward onto his bed. His armor pushed him into the soft mattress to such a degree that he couldn't breathe. Reluctantly, he mustered the strength to roll onto his back, and vowed to sleep until the trees that had not yet begun to lose their leaves regained them all.

A knock at the door spoiled his plan, and he ignored it, hoping that the person would think he was somewhere else. Unfortunately, the person was far too intuitive to be fooled by such a juvenile ruse.

He heard the door being gently closed, and light footsteps that most anyone who had not spent the previous two weeks on constant alert for the slightest rustling in the brush of a ghostly forest would never have detected. They stopped, and he sighed again, eyes still shut as he greeted the visitor. "What is it, Kei Sa?"

"Your presence has been requested at a meeting of the advisors."

"That's really nice. Can I sleep now?"

"General, this meeting could have monumental consequences. Yuen Po's death has tossed the council off-balance, and Yuen Jer Rod has plans for change."

"Honestly, Kei Sa, at this moment, I wouldn't care if they were deciding to execute everyone with gray eyes," he said, sleepily

rubbing his.

"Would you like to consider what our queen shall do to you if you do not honor this meeting with your attendance?"

Wei Yong looked at the pale woman unhappily. He dragged himself to his feet and shrugged off his armor, letting it clatter to the floor in a disarrayed heap. "Give me a bit, will you?"

* * *

><p>In a matter of minutes, Kei Sa stepped into the conference room, followed by a damp but clean Li Wei Yong. He glanced at the complete assembly of advisors. "Fashionably late, as usual."</p>

"Actually, General," commented the emperor, "You're seldom late."

"But if you want to pretend because it makes you feel suave, you may," added his sister condescendingly.

"I don't have to pretend," Wei Yong responded to his wife. "I just am."

"I never noticed."

"Children, please," interrupted the main political advisor. "We haven't all day. Let's put these juvenile squabbles behind us and concentrate on the matter at hand."

"And that would be...?" prompted Wei Yong.

"Sit," the advisor sternly ordered. The general hurriedly took the chair on his wife's left, to the right of Kei Sa, who had already sat.

In his seat to the right of Ming and left of the empty chair caused by his great-great-grandmother's death, Emperor Yuen Jer Rod leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table's frosted glass surface. "I have called you together in order to discuss the revisions that must be made to our government. We have changed next to nothing since my father was removed from power, besides freeing the slavesâ€"which was very much in order," he added quickly, nodding at Kei Sa. "I ask of you, is it moral, is it righteous, is it permissible for us to follow in the Tyrant's footsteps?"

The advisors shook their heads, some looking at the table as though chastised for their lack of effort.

One spoke, trying to justify their dormancy, "It's been a rough time, trying to accustom the people to freedom again, after such tyranny, then chaosâ€" "

"I don't want excuses," Jer Rod rebuked, "I only want action."

The room fell into silence. "You're advisors," continued the emperor, leaning back. "Advise."

No one spoke. They fidgeted, and looked around, examining everything but Jer Rod, yet not one so much as opened his mouth.

He sighed. "Have I frightened you, now? I am not my father. You need not fear me. The lecture is over; now we remedy the problem. Our entire hierarchy must be reorganized."

The political advisor shook his head, "Emperor, do you suggest that we let these planets go back to their roots? For some of them, back to their barbarian practices? History need not repeat itself. I remember the Roman Empire's fall."

"Mr. Chan, we should be not the Roman Empire, with an insatiable will to conquer, but the Roman Republic, bringing our advancements still, but allowing the people to represent themselves. One step farther: every world can be equal."

"We'd still need a ruler over all," chimed in a different advisor.

"Naturally," said Jer Rod.

"And who will that be?"

"Me...hopefully."

"We'd hold an election," said another.

"Of course."

"Let the twelve planets nominate a candidate each."

"Absolutely."

"And you, being the only one qualified, would win."

"That's what we're hoping will happen. If it doesn't...we'll deal with that if it happens." To the shocked looks of his advisors, Jer Rod soothed, "I don't mean an assassination or anything of the sort. I will remind you once more: I am not my father. We'll hope the one who wins is capable, and help himâ€"or her," he amended, glancing at his sister, who smiled back, "in whatever ways we can."

"Will the capital remain here?" asked Li Wei Yong. "Will the other planets want that? Do we want our palace to become abuzz with the activity of the galaxy, all our possible secrets laid open to every other leader? Do we want a senateâ€"which I'm assuming you're implyingâ€"to meet in our palace? It sounds selfish, but, as general of our armies, though our affairs are not completely secret, I do not wish other governments to know of our techniques and our strength. I think other planets will feel the same, about everything. Do we not want ours to remain ours, and make a new place for a new government?"

"I had decided we must move the seat of the government," confirmed the emperor, "though for other reasons than yours, I must admit. I had thought it would appear to the others that we were only a member of our new government, rather than its ruler, if we moved the capital to, oh, Edenia."

Ming covered her eyes with her hands. "Is this related to that

Princess Sindel whom you have recently met?" she dryly asked. Her brother did not answer, though his ears began to redden. The silence became disconcerting as Ming looked at her brother expectantly, as though if given enough time, he would answer.

Saving him from his embarrassment, an advisor offered, "Surely we must have a ruler on this planet, to further the point that we are only a member."

"I will," Ming said, suddenly serious. "Send Chan to the senate on Edenia. Leave me here, where I belong. Teach me everything you know, Jer Rod."

"Ming," he said slowly, "are you sure you want to do this?"

"Are you saying that I'm not capable? I have experienceâ€"well, someâ€"and you can trust me. Everyone here can help me. Do you want to say to the people, 'Oh, she can't be your queen anymore. She was only a little doll on display'? I have to do this."

"Father didn't teach you how to be a leaderâ€""

"I can't learn? Am I daft now because I happen to be female? I will learn."

Jer Rod glanced at each advisor in turn. "Her Righteousness Li Yuen Ming will remain queen; she will become the leader. Anyone who has a problem with that can report directly to me."

"She will need help with more than politics," said a soft voice.

Ming looked to Kei Sa, feeling betrayed. "You don't think I can do this either?"

"I think you can do it. You will regardless. I have no doubt of that. But you shall become a greater target than you ever were before. You will go to hostile planets as an ambassador. You will calm volatile situations on our planet, and any other where your help is requested. Do you want to do this alone? What happens when you're in the middle of enemy territory and you must be strong? Can you be without backup?"

"Gentlemen, and queen, I suggest that we provide Li Yuen Ming with an elite force of guards, an honor guard, perhaps. The members would be excellent fighters, the best that can be found, with talents that will make them indispensable to our cause. Every one should be trusted to the end of the galaxy, or beyond, if necessary."

"A marvelous idea," commented Jer Rod.

"I don't need extra protection. I can take care of myself," protested Ming.

"The queen herself could be a member," added Kei Sa. "This would serve to throw off enemies. Such a drastic difference exists between her formal appearances in make-up and intricate attire and her simplistic style of fighting clothes that few would guess the two persons were one and the same."

"How many members?" asked Wei Yong, intrigued by the idea. "And when do I sign up?"

"Thirteen is a good number," commented an advisor.

"As good as any," said Kei Sa. "Any vetoes on thirteen? Thirteen it is. I have given this much thought, and I believe a tournament would be in order to help us select the members. Each should have four areas of skill: unarmed combat, armed combat--with wooden weapons in the tournament, naturally--proficiency with an element, and some special talent that cannot be tested in a tournament, but rather researched."

"This is the best idea I've heard in a long time--why, in fact since my father died," said Jer Rod.

"Emperor," said Chan, "I thought you said you were finished reprimanding us about that."

"Did I?"

* * *

><p>"And when he's not busy saving the galaxy in times of war, as a brilliant sniper and captain, Nai Do Xian squanders his time cleaning up after other people's horses."<p>

Do Xian dumped the pail of feed into the horse's bin and looked toward the entrance. "Good day, General. Here to see your horse?"

"Not primarily, but since I'm here, why not? We're a lot alike, you know, living on horses and fighting."

"The breeder gets annoyed when I drop hints about what you want to see. Tells me to tell you to stay out of his job."

"Maybe I should just fire him. Maybe I should just fire you, for being a coward."

"You and I both know that I am not a coward."

"Really? You hide and attack your enemies before you can even see them. This is considered bravery?"

Do Xian threw up his hands and admitted defeat. "You're not going to fire me."

"Of course not. You keep the stables cleanest. As for yourself..." Wei Yong flicked a piece of straw off the sniper's back, "it's hard to believe you clean up so well for the uniform."

"Have you come merely to torment me or was there a purpose to this visit?"

"Captain, you ought to reconsider entering the tournament."

The sniper slammed the bucket onto the ground. "No, no, no! Didn't we already discuss this? It's not possible. I'm not honor guard material."

"You don't know. How will you know if you don't try?"

"I'm perfectly happy where I am."

"You're going to sit around here for the rest of your life, cleaning up horse droppings and filling up water troughs as though you have the intelligence of a rock when you're actually the best sniper on the planet and an ace pilot as well? What a waste. I've sparred with you. You're good. You have to try."

"I said 'no' and I meant 'no', general."

"I could make it an order."

"No, you couldn't."

"Says who?" Do Xian frowned and Wei Yong continued. "You know I'm going to pester you until you give in."

Nai Do Xian rubbed his eyes. "I'll think about it."

"You better do more than that."

Li Wei Yong patted his horse's shoulder and left. Do Xian sighed.

* * *

><p>Zhen Feng Qui pulled off his hat and ran his hand through his close-cropped hair as he stared at the Mandalorian palace. "How quaint." He looked slightly down to his friend. "Wouldn't you agree?"</p>

Ta Lian Shi raised his eyebrows. "Haven't you been here before?"

"No. You talk as though you have, friend."

"For the wedding. Shenah made me come. Though I must admit, it's quite different now. All vacant and calm."

"You shouldn't allow her to push you around so."

"It was her birthday." He shrugged. "And she was mad because I went on that diving expedition."

"She had a point. You could have died."

"Would I have gone otherwise?"

The taller friend acknowledged the statement with a nod of his head. "So quiet here. I already prefer Onyx Coast."

"Indeed."

They struggled with their bags as they entered the palace courtyard, suspiciously guarding them from the servants who tried to help. Reaching the tournament registration desk, Zhen Feng Qui dropped his bags and leaned on the counter, smiling at the girl who turned to help them.

"Hello, madam," he said. "Sorry we're late, but we need to pick up our weapons now. Training calls."

"I'm sorry, but the registration deadline was a week ago, and most registered close to a month ago, to give the weapon maker time to work. You're too late."

"Excuse me, madam," cut in the shorter, wiry friend, "but I do not believe you realize who we are. I am Ta Lian Shi, champion of this year's Onyx Coast Fighting Tournament, and this is my friend, Zhen Feng Qui, second place."

The secretary raised her hands, palms upward, and shook her head slowly, clearly not recognizing the names.

"We had a special arrangement."

"Oh, you. I'll be right back." She walked to the tent behind the temporary desk, to retrieve their wooden weapons.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but is this the registration desk?"

The fighters from Onyx Coast turned to look at the boy standing behind him.

"Who would this be, Zhen?" asked Ta Lian Shi.

"I wouldn't know, Lian. No one we've met. Look at the hair!" He pulled on the boy's locks, lengthy compared to his own.

"And the clothes. He looks like a farmer." They laughed.

"I think you're bit late, though, boy. Registration ended a week ago," said Zhen.

"I had to finish the harvest," the newcomer explained.

Lian hit Zhen in the chest with the back of his hand. "I told you he was a farmer."

"Now then," breathed the receptionist, returning and setting three packages on the counter.

"Uh, madam, there's two of us," noted Lian.

She lifted her chin and looked at him down her nose, pointing to the men standing at the desk and counting on her fingers. "One, two, three. Perhaps you should get a tutor to sharpen your mental skills rather than physical."

"He doesn't count," Zhen said, pushing the newcomer away, and standing in front of him, his tall form easily blocking the other.

"I had three special packages," said the receptionist, blatantly annoyed. "I brought them all." She looked at the tag on the top box, which was smallish and square. "Tieh Chen Yi."

"That would be me," said the newcomer, shoving Zhen away so

forcefully that the older fighter stumbled.

"What?" exclaimed Lian. "They bend over backward for you? Boy from Middle of Nowhere?"

"I'm from Sapphire Coast," Chen Yi said, more than irritated.

"That's what I said. Middle of Nowhere."

"I happen to be the grand champion of Sapphire Coast," proclaimed Chen Yi.

"So? You're better than two thousand other people."

"Five thousand," he corrected with an adamant scowl.

"Oh, excuse me. You're better than five thousand other people. Well, listen, boy, I'm the grand champion of Onyx Coast. I'm better than five hundred thousand people."

"And I'm better than four-hundred ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine people," Zhen Feng Qui added.

"So I wouldn't get your hopes up in this tournament. You're outclassed, country boy."

The friends picked up their packages—Zhen's long and thin, Lian's flat and rectangular—and left.

Tieh Chen Yi rolled his eyes, and made a disgusted noise. "I wish I could apologize for their behavior toward you, ma'am."

He carefully opened his package, and pulled out a rubber whip and a waved, wooden dagger. He snapped the whip around, testing its flexibility and strength as he switched the dagger into several grips, evaluating its balance and weight, in an impressive display of agility and form. "Fantastic!" He turned back toward the secretary. "Where are our real weapons?"

"The weapon maker has them stored in the backroom of his workshop. You can have them back after the tournament."

"Well, ma'am, tell this weapon maker that he has my compliments on an impeccable job."

12. V

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

V.

* * *

><p>Tieh Chen Yi squinted and, in order to shade his eyes with his left hand, he switched his wooden dagger into his right, which already held his whip. All participants had been asked to arrive an hour early for instructions: a plethora of them, and excruciatingly

precise. Chen Yi had thought the formality to be torture and decided to simply ignore most of the instructions as he saw Onyx Coast's champions do, rather than obey with the lifeless rigidity of the former ninjas and the renowned sniper. Even the army's commander, General Li, seemed to disregard the rules he had likely helped to create, weaving through the crowd and laughing with his fellow fighters.<p>

What had been the subdued murmuring of a few when he arrived had grown into the incomprehensible roar of a crowd, swallowing any attempt to catch another's attention. He silently cursed the sun that shone so much more fiercely in Silver Coast than Sapphire Coast, driving away any hope for shadows, and glaring off the surface of the stands that had been constructed on the army's main training field. While the grass, painstakingly tended by brilliant gardeners to tenaciously survive all abuse, felt soft and springy, the perfect environment for sparring without suffering injury from falls, the chaos of the crowd rattled him. He wondered with great anxiety whether he would have the mental discipline to fight amidst its distractions.

The crowd had swelled considerably, swarming into the makeshift stadium and hiding the face for which he so desperately searched. Sheâ€"his longtime girlfriendâ€"was there, somewhere, and he hoped she had better luck discerning him from the others in the area than he had finding her.

A sudden hush overtook the crowd, and he snapped himself back into the position he'd been givenâ€"a random slot in the middle row. He dropped his hand and held the dagger in a reverse grip, repetitively pressing the unsharpened point into his forearm in a release of anxious energy as the new Emperor Yuen began to speak.

"I have no desire to expend frivolous words today," he said, his voice amplified to fill far beyond the stadium, "as you have no desire to hear them."

"Amen," someone said, barely loud enough for the rest of the fighters to hear, and as they chuckled, Chen Yi glanced over to the source of the familiar voice and accent, to see Zhen Feng Qui smiling in the wake of his remark.

"Sixty-four fighters you see before you," continued the emperor, oblivious to the slight disruption behind him, "representing every Coast, all the people of Mandalore, individually and as one. At the close of the tournament, thirteen will remain, to mark the beginning of what will undoubtedly be a legendary group." He swept his hand in a broad arc, indicating the area in the center of the field where all the hopefuls stood and that in one week's time would be occupied by the Queen's Honor Guard.

"The first two days will consist of armed combat, using Weapon Master Len's wooden replicas, and all precautions, I assure you. Eighteen of the losers will be eliminated, based on their performance, character, and areas of expertise. The third and fourth days will revolve around unarmed combat, and twenty will be eliminated. The final twenty-six will then display their proficiency with their individual elements on the fifth day. On the sixth, the council, the queen, and I will determine the proper thirteen to fill the ranks, and announce them on the seventh and final day."

Halfway down the row from Tieh Chen Yi, Ta Lian Shi turned to his friend, Zhen. "It's rigged."

* * *

><p>Rah Cai Yue flicked his wrist and his slim short sword rotated slowly as it traced a graceful arc in the sky, landing in his other hand, where it immediately was spun in a quick circle. The crowd cheered and his opponent snorted.</p>

"Worthless show-off," accused the former Lin Kuei ninja, Vendetta.

"You're just jealous." Cai Yue swung his leg in front of him, stretching and warming his muscles.

Vendetta stood ready, his left side positioned forward, the stance slimming the target of his body. He held a heavy, straight sword at a slight incline, the tip aimed for the space above Cai Yue's head.

"You will not have the opportunity to warm up before a real battle."

Cai Yue shrugged, indifferent to the acerbic ninja's comments. He was familiar with mind games; he used them in almost every fight, as well as consistently in his daily life, though his fellow priests frowned upon them. "No use risking injury before the real fighting begins."

"Merely standing in the same arena as me is risking injury."

"Oh..." Cai Yue stuck out his bottom lip in a fake pout. "Is the big bad ninja going to mush the talentless little opera boy?"

"I wouldn't mock if I was the one who fought with an ineffective style like a trivial dancer."

"Ineffective? We'll let the judges decide." Cai Yue nodded at them to indicate that his preparation was complete, and slid into a defensive stance. His sword, tilted back to point to the space above his left shoulder, was held only by his right hand, while his left wrist's guard was held against the underside of the blade near its tip. His weight was concentrated on his back leg--his left leg.

Vendetta smiled derisively, his lined face creasing, and stepped out of his stance to walk just outside the circumference of Cai Yue's reach. The younger man shifted his weight continuously to face the ninja, refusing to surrender in their battle of will.

Vendetta abruptly feinted, jerking forward with a slash that would never have reached the intended target. Cai Yue, with suspicions that the ninja's first move would be a lure, but also with the understanding that it could just as easily be a legitimate strike, twisted out of the way, neither falling into the ninja's trap, nor leaving himself vulnerable for the attack. He spun lightly on his foot, and struck with an upward slash.

The attack was caught by a straight sword and forced upward in a restricted range, deflecting the strike. "Impressive," acknowledged Vendetta.

"I don't need compliments from you," retorted Cai Yue.

"Testy."

Cai Yue clenched his teeth with annoyance, berating himself for having been so easily goaded. He sliced toward the ninja with a swift horizontal motion, taking the offensive. Vendetta deftly blocked the attack and countered with his own, aiming for Cai Yue's unprotected neck. The younger man leaned backward, easily avoiding the slash, and flipped his sword toward his opponent with a diagonal slash that whiffed through the air and was followed by a slight stab that grazed the side of the ninja's ribs, as Vendetta hopped out of the way. Had the blade been sharp, it would have inflicted an irritating but hardly fatal wound.

Cai Yue tossed several more attacks, testing the ninja's skills and pattern of defense, trying to find a chink in his cast-iron defense as Vendetta easily and disdainfully blocked every attack. Finally, Vendetta smacked Cai Yue's sword far to the right with a fierce block that resounded with the sharp retort of wood upon wood. Cai Yue leaped into a one-handed cartwheel past the ninja and regained his feet with just enough time to forcefully block the wild swing Vendetta had sent behind himself in hopes of catching the younger man off-guard at the end of his cartwheel.

The duel exploded as the opponents simultaneously dipped into the full range of their skill, launching blows but never connecting, scrambling to block but never failing. Vendetta lunged into the powerful attacks Cai Yue had expected from the beginning, reigning offensively. Cai Yue blocked half of the jarring attacks and gracefully evaded the others, slipping out of the range of the blows in fluid, hardly noticeable motions, and lashing with well-timed opportunistic attacks that caused Vendetta to jerk into a block, disrupted from his attacks. The ferocity with which they fought was taxing, and the careless, hardly noticeable errors they made piled atop the others, wearing down to the eventual loss.

Vendetta reached with a huge horizontal swing. Cai Yue shoved his right leg behind him, dropping into a low stance and swinging his thin sword at the ninja's knees. Vendetta jumped, easily clearing the strike and came down on one leg, shoving the other into Cai Yue's right hand. His jaw dropped in pain and the sword slipped from his stinging hand. Vendetta sneered and raised his sword to administer what would be the 'killing' blow.

But Rah Cai Yue snatched the sword in his left hand almost before it hit the grass and stabbed upward, sending Vendetta frantically backpedaling away from the blow and destroying his balance. Cai Yue immediately took the offensive, adopting the all-out approach that characterized his opponent's style. Vendetta stumbled backward, barely catching each attack, unable to regain his balance. In a final attempt to salvage it, he flipped into a backward handspring, landing out of his opponent's range and breathing just as deeply as he did.

"Ambidextrous," commented Vendetta. "Now I am impressed."

Cai Yue smiled angelically. "Why thank you, Vendetta. I never expected to hear such a nice compliment from a brutal ninja such as

yourself."

"And he learns from his mistakes."

Rah Cai Yue hopped forward with a circular swing of his sword, restarting the fight. Vendetta gently pushed the blade past him, used his left foot to sweep Cai Yue off-balance and reversed the direction of his sword to slam the flat of the blade with full force against Cai Yue's sword just above its hilt. The sword thudded onto the grass, and Cai Yue thudded onto his back, looking dazed.

"Well, now," said Vendetta, standing triumphantly over the younger man. "How shall I kill you?"

Cai Yue didn't answer. A shadow appeared between his right hand and the fallen sword, distorting the grass around it. With the aid of the force of gravity, the blade returned to his hand as he rolled into a forward somersault, then leapt upward, well inside the ninja's reach. He smacked the flat of the blade against Vendetta's throat with lightly moderate force, hard enough to cause the ninja to involuntarily cough, but not hard enough to cause permanent damage.

Rah Cai Yue dropped his sword to his side. "Quickly, or not at all."

* * *

><p>Five minutes later, Vendetta had recovered his voice, and was barely able to control its volume in his rage as he stood before the judges.</p>

"What do you mean, I lost? This boy cheated!" The ninja slammed the side of his hand against a palm for emphasis. "The rules specifically state that we are not to use our element."

"No," Cai Yue corrected, looking bored. "The rules specifically state that we are not to use our element against our opponent. It said nothing about using it against our weapon."

"You can't be listening to this nonsense."

The judge looked unaffected by Vendetta's tirade. "We are searching for those who are adaptive and clever." Vendetta seethed. The judge slowly reiterated. "Rah Cai Yue wins."

Vendetta stalked away, and Cai Yue grinned, then shook his right hand. "Ow."

* * *

><p>In the middle of the arena, Captain Lan Yiao Nih banged his daggers together, tapping a militaristic cadence as he waited. His two daggers were the length and width of his forearm, the single sharpened edge curving to the unsharpened edge to round the blade into a barely defined point where they met, diminishing the weapons' effect in a stab and restricting them to slashes. He smiled maliciously as he watched his opponent, a young and obviously nervous army foot soldier, who, by his looks, had yet to see a real battle.</p>

Sitting under the shade of the stands, Yuen Jer Rod grimaced at the expression on the captain's face and the obvious outcome of the fight. His countenance did not improve as he watched his prediction proved accurate, the ruthless fighter downing the young man in record time. Lan Xiao Nih sheathed the wooden models of his favored weapons and crossed his arms as he left the arena, not looking back at the young man who wobbled to his feet, crushed.

"At least he doesn't toy with them," the emperor muttered, then jumped as his twin sister sat beside him, looking worried.

"You do realize that you shouldn't judge Lan Xiao Nih based upon Wei Yong's attitude against him. They've never liked each other. I will admit that Captain Lan can be obnoxious and I don't particularly like him either, but he cannot be judged by our personal prejudices."

Jer Rod nodded. "I assure you that I have been doing my best to remain impartial. Though I do not particularly like the way he fights, no one will be counted against for being ruthless. It can be a necessary trait at times."

"I trust you, Jer Rod. I should get ready to fight."

"Luck be with you."

Ming smiled as she left. "Thank you."

* * *

><p>Rah Cai Yue spied a patch of shadowed ground just outside the arena and sat cross-legged, pulling out his worn, leather-bound book. He opened it to the middle, and licking his thumb, flicked several pages forward. He set the book on the grass and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his clasped hands, preparing to read.</p>

The unsharpened tip of a wooden blade thumped onto the ground in front of the book, burying itself in a slight furrow. He traced the curve of the edge up its modest length until it joined a rounded staff, held by a manicured, feminine hand, and on up to the second blade, upon which a head draped in damp ebony locks rested.

"Hello, Ming. Congratulations on your match."

"Show me how to do that," she panted, brushing away a tiny droplet of sweat that had run down her nose.

He sat up and glanced around him, seeing nothing but his book, which he closed and tucked away. "What? Read?"

She shook her head weakly, fatigued. "Element."

Cai Yue raised his eyebrows, incredulous, and stood in a single motion. "Am I understanding this correctly? You intend to be a member of your honor guard, you even fight to prove that you're qualified regardless of the fact that your spot is guaranteed, you're specifically testing us on this skill, but you can't do it?"

Her face flushed more than it already had been. "Cai Yue, not so

loud." She turned toward the palace, motioning for him to come. "I have tried..." she whispered defensively. "Nearly the entire year I was with the Oracle, actually."

"Didn't you get something? Even a little speck?" He took her weapon, spinning it around his left forearm to the dismay of those trying to pass by him on their way to the arena.

Ming shook her head and brushed the stray hairs off of her face with both arms, leaving her hands on the top of her head to expand her rib cage and allow her to breathe more easily.

"Is it possible that you also have no element, like Kei Sa?"

"No. Absolutely not." She dropped her hands to her side, then caught her double-bladed staff in the middle of Cai Yue's spin, returning it to her side.

"Well, there's only one way to find yours."

"What would that be?"

"Try." Cai Yue flashed a droll smile.

"Why thank you for your brilliant insight, Cai Yue, but I'm afraid your astounding intellect has failed to help me in this single instance."

"Oh, but my astounding intellect has not yet depleted itself."

"I find that hard to believe."

Cai Yue stopped and crossed his arms. "If you are going to be mean, I will find someone else to help, someone who deserves my unmatched reservoir of knowledge."

"Forgive me, Master Rah," she replied, bowing.

"That's more like it." He thought for a few seconds. "Do you have plenty of time?"

"I don't like the sound of that, Cai Yue."

"The best method is to find a place where you are comfortable, where you can be yourself and are not distracted from your true nature, where nothing is pushing you in another direction than the one your soul longs to take."

"Cai Yue, you do realize that you're talking to the most molded person on this planet."

He nodded. "Hence the question about time."

* * *

><p>"I hate this." Ming slammed her staff on the ground as she pushed herself up, the wooden blades smacking the worn surface of the stage and providing resounding emphasis to her failure.<p>

"I'm running out of ideas," Cai Yue said flatly as he blinked his

eyes and fought a yawn.

"Forgive me for wasting your night, friend," she replied, incensed at his tired apathy.

It was well after midnight, and Cai Yue was nearly as frustrated as Ming. He closed his eyes, both in an attempt to contemplate their next destination and as a surrender to the burning that plagued them.

They had gone everywhere he could think of, but success eluded them. The natural first choice had been Ming's chambers, but she felt oppressed by the sight of her dresses hanging in the wardrobe. Also she could sense the residue of her husband though they had politely asked the general, who was as shocked at and skeptical of Ming's dilemma as Cai Yue had been, to leave. Then her nursery, "Too many memories of my father's mandates." The beach she had coveted to train upon as a child, "A hope for escape, but always a chimera." The stables that at times served as a haven, "A tranquil place, but horses have never been my interest." Lastly the stage, but "the opera has always been as much about a chance for physical exercise and mock-fighting as it was music, and I don't need an excuse to fight anymore."

Rah Cai Yue stood and rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Ming, but I'm exhausted and we do have to fight tomorrow. We still have one more day. Let's call it a night, shall we?"

"You're giving up on me? You think I'm hopeless?" Ming's eyes flashed.

"No, no... Those are irrational, premature conclusions."

"Well how about something logical? Don't you think I'll need practice?" She placed her hands on her hips like a defiant child, her lips tightly pressed in indignation.

Cai Yue sighed. "One last try." He thought intensely, then dropped his hands in resignation at his lack of inspiration. "Where are you going to be tomorrow?"

"In the arena, much of the day."

Cai Yue's lips quirked as he gained sudden insight. "Where do you want to be tomorrow?"

Ming exhaled slowly, pushing her stray hairs back with one hand. "In all truth, the arena."

"Then to the arena we shall go." Cai Yue jumped off the stage and beckoned for Ming to follow, with haste.

The half-moon shone high above in a clear sky, lighting the way enough to obviate the need of an additional light, but allowing the deep shadows of the night to swell around them, diminishing visibility drastically. The arena seemed derelict and lonely in its vacancy, longing to be occupied and fulfill its purpose.

They sat on the grass in the middle of the arena, the moon washing their skin with its ivory glow. Ming closed her eyes and leaned down,

rubbing a hand across the tips of the grass, then placing it over the other where it was pushed against the ground, supporting the weight of her upper body.

Cai Yue watched her, enchanted by her serene rapture, understanding that she had, finally yet instantly, found her place and her connection. In the minutes that followed she became only more intent in her concentration with the earth beneath her, oblivious to the passing of time as she communicated without words, opening the link to her power.

Raising her head and opening her eyes, Ming removed her hands from the earth, and Cai Yue watched in wonder as the green sprout of a plant budded from beneath the grass and grew with unfathomable speed. Its leaves unfolded as it matured, with only the spirit of a woman to fuel its life.

Ming turned her head and smiled at Cai Yue, tears brimming in her eyes.

He bit his tongue, knowing that an exclamation of awe would only ruin her moment, which paralleled one that he had once experienced and would never easily forget.

13. VI

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

**VI. **

* * *

><p>Ta Lian Shi loped into the arena, precisely on time for his match, neither a minute early nor a minute late. Following regulations, he wore firm padding to protect against injury. The winner of the match would be determined based on a point system rather than ending in a knockout; the judges would track each strike and allot points according to the previously established guidelines until one player had reached the requisite number.<p>

He laced his fingers behind his back, lifting his arms to stretch as he walked toward the center, where his opponent was engrossed in a stretching exercise, sitting on the ground and leaning over a straight leg, the other foot placed against his thigh.

Lian stopped beside the other fighter, the shadow he cast falling over the other and causing him to look toward its source.

"Hello, country boy," said Lian, smirking under the padded mask he wore as part of the armor, his accented voice slightly muffled by it.

Tieh Chen Yi bent his outstretched leg and sat up. "Your level of condescension is inappropriate. I am a year and a half older than you."

"Someone did his homework." Lian nodded smugly. "Very well," he agreed. "I will find something else to call you."

"I've got a suggestion: 'Tieh Chen Yi'."

"No, no, that'll never do." Lian swung his arms in wide circles and jumped twice. "Are you ready yet?"

Chen Yi hopped to his feet, and adopted a low powerful stance, his fists held in front of his face—a stance very much like the one into which Ta Lian Shi had crouched.

"I see we have something in common," Lian remarked. "No wonder you're good."

"Shut up and fight," replied Chen Yi, narrowing his eyes and adopting the aggressive attitude he reserved for combat alone.

Lian lunged forward with two jabs that were ducked by Chen Yi, who countered with a firm punch that was aimed for the stomach but glanced off the side as Lian sidestepped. He sent a heavy side kick toward Chen Yi's head, but Sapphire Coast's champion dropped to the ground, and swung his leg along it, knocking Lian off his feet.

Lian fell, but grabbed Chen Yi's foot as he rose, yanking him down and then rolling backward into a standing position. Chen Yi also rolled away and stood, hopping out of the way of the hastily and sloppily planned jump kick that had followed him. Lian overshot his goal and Chen Yi kicked him the back, forcing him forward.

Anchoring a leg in front of him and reversing his adverse momentum, Lian shoved his fist into Chen Yi's stomach, the punch causing a thump that was heard by most everyone in the arena. Chen Yi was frozen for a moment in pain, and Lian punched his chest with his other hand and elbowed him in the jaw.

Chen Yi stumbled back but managed to grab the next punch and drag Lian behind him before attacking with a spinning hook kick and a roundhouse kick, both of which impacted on Lian's right shoulder. Onyx Coast's champion used the force to spin himself around to face his opponent, swinging his leg in a broad arc as he did so. The crescent kick whiffed by Chen Yi's ear, though he felt the displacement of air it caused. Lian kicked his other leg nearly straight upward, catching Chen Yi under the chin and tossing him backward. He dashed in as Chen Yi rose and shoved his elbow into the other's solar plexus, pushing Chen Yi back a few inches.

But his next punch was blocked and viciously countered with a set of flashing jabs and a final hook that spun him to the ground. He swiped his foot along the ground, trying to force Chen Yi to keep his distance while he rose, but Chen Yi jumped with a beautifully executed flying side kick that knocked him backward. Chen Yi landed easily on one foot and, with the same foot that had just kicked Lian, snapped a simple roundhouse kick.

The strike impacted squarely on the padding covering Lian's left cheek, but he turned his falling motion into a spin, forming a spinning hook kick that he was far too inside to properly execute. He caught Chen Yi's neck with the inside of his knee and pushed him to the ground, kneeling down to keep him temporarily in the hold, but in that instant, a shrill whistle resounded.

One judge stood and proclaimed to the crowd and to the fighters, "Tieh Chen Yi, Champion of Sapphire Coast, is the victor of this match."

"What?" Lian lifted his foot, stepping away from Chen Yi. "Are you sure?"

"The roundhouse kick that Chen Yi threw before your last move was his final. You have received the amount of damage that we determined would render you unable to fight."

"How weak do you think I am?"

"Arguing will not change our minds," said another judge, a stern woman, rising and holding out her sheet of tally marks for him to examine.

Lian ignored it and tore off the padding he wore, tossing it to the ground in a tantrum. "This thing is rigged." He began to storm out of the arena, livid. Then, as if in an afterthought, he spun around sharply. Chen Yi flinched back, expecting an outburst of anger, but Lian bowed almost imperceptibly.

"Good fight, kid." He then continued his stomp out of the arena.

Chen Yi, from his sitting position on the ground, raised his hands slightly in exasperation. "Kid?"

* * *

><p>As Hua Quy Ling stumbled backward and hit the ground, hard, a short whistle blew and the judge proclaimed Kei Sa to be the winner of the match. Undoubtedly. Unsurprisingly.</p>

He hopped to his feet, the water-filled padding making him feel more sluggish than he should have been; he did not resent it, however, as he would consequently have hardly a bruise from the extensive trouncing he had just received.

Had he hit her? He thought so...maybe. No matter. He harbored no more enmity toward her than he had when he started; the great mass of the opposite had increased, in all actuality.

"Marvelous fight, Kei Sa. I've always been impressed," he said cordially. She glanced back, and wearily smiled, pulling off the padding and revealing her characteristic white dress. The lack of motion in her gait made it appear to be a full skirt. For the moment at least, the older women weren't horrified at the amount of leg she showed when it opened to allow movement, every bit of their shock countered by the approval of the younger. Mid-thigh down was a lot of bare skin, really, and the shorts above were far tighter than they were loose.

He trailed her as she climbed the stands--"ninja skills were good for something, after all"--heading for the dignitary box at the top. No one seemed to notice or care that the young sweating man was neither noble nor ambassador, and not at all important to their lives, not at all worthy of the privilege that awaited in the box.

Kei Sa folded her hands as she took a place in front of the glass-paned window, the othersâ€”obviously rich, some of which had probably used the slavesâ€”for the most part, ignored her. Some cast contemptuous glances in her direction, as though her very presence in the tournament was a shallow trick to pretend that the slaves were equal and were being treated so.

He saw only one other fighter in the box, for Her Righteousness and General Li had not yet fought and returned. The priest friend of the queen's sat talking to a large overbearing woman and a harried-looking man. He guessed from their age and nagging behavior toward him that they were his parents, and he felt a flash of pain. Parents, as annoying as they could be, were at least someone who would always promise love. Ever since the day they were killed and he was thrown into subjugation he had felt regret that he had never appreciated his.

He shook himself out of his remembrance and returned his attention to his reason for trespassing. "Kei Sa, where did you learn to fight?"

She seemed to sigh. "The opera, and then the Oracle taught me. I suppose I have a bit of natural talent, as well."

"A bit?" Quy forced a laugh. "You have an entire planet's worth."

She smiled her polite, artificial little smile and returned her attention to the arena.

He kicked his foot on the floor. Maybe he needed to stop such ambiguity and be forthright in order to accomplish anything with this girl. Summoning a monster breath, he said, "Kei Sa, doâ€”"

"Shh," she said. "The general is fighting."

Indeed he was, and Hua Quy Ling had to admit that he had style. He effortlessly darted around his opponent, a poor kid who never had a chance. The crowd cheered with every point he gained. The spectators were nearly as fond of the general as they were of the queen's priest friend, Rah Cai Yue...

...Who had risen to stand by Kei Sa and discuss the details of the fight, chuckling, with her.

He could have screamed.

Instead, he bit his cheek with excessive force and feigned serenity as he left the box.

* * *

><p>A massive blob of water flew through the air, hurtling toward Rah Cai Yue. He thrust out his hands and a faint shadow of anti-gravity threw it back toward its originator, Ta Lian Shi, who soaked it back into his body and prepared a second attack.</p>

"Stop it!" yelled the stern female judge, rising from her seat and slamming her notebook on the table. "You are not to cause a ruckus and you are not to summon your element before the event

begins!"

They stopped, dropping their arms and staring at the judge who had chastised them. Then Lian turned toward Cai Yue and waved a finger. "You will get it, later."

"We'll see about that." The priest smiled self-confidently.

The lady glared at them until they took their place in line.

Yuen Jer Rod stepped out as the judge sat, and raised his hands to dim the clamor of the crowd. "Today, ladies and gentlemen, you will see the finest display of elemental talent in years. Some of you may have never seen the power that each and every one of you is capable of using. For some of you, this will be a fond reminder of better times."

The crowd cheered, their sense of romanticism awakened by the promise of legendary power.

Jer Rod smiled and faced the twenty-six remaining participants in the tournament. "Exactly half of you will return home disappointed," he said frankly. "At the sound of the whistle, you are to demonstrate your element to the best of your ability without harming or affecting any of your fellow participants. If your control or element is questionable, the judges will interfere in order to determine if you are capable."

Ming broke the eye contact she'd had with her brother, lowering her head and planting her feet at shoulder-width. The whistle screeched its high note, and she breathed deeply, hunting for her newly forged connection with the earth. It came to her easily, as though it was an old friend rather than a new acquaintance, and she felt rather than watched a tendril of a vine sprout from the ground before her, waving and cracking like a whip.

A gust of wind blew across her left side, throwing her vine to the ground. She caused it to lift itself back off the ground and opened her eyes to see Tempest bow low to her, as she had passed his test, her concentration unbroken. She glared half-heartedly at him, and he stirred the air into a vicious miniature cyclone.

Nai Do Xian, even with his sniper-trained eyes, could barely see the effects of the cyclone, and he knew that hardly anyone else would be able to detect its presence. He ceased his tiny earthquake and caused some of the dirt to fly into the whirlwind, instantly coloring it. Tempest nodded his thanks.

Ta Lian Shi raised his eyebrows and created tiny droplets of water to fall from the space just above the cyclone. Li Wei Yong grinned and focused energy into a diminished bolt of lightning, completing the pseudo-storm.

The female judge stopped in front of the display, glaring in turn at each of those responsible.

Yen Sa, the youngest participant remaining at barely seventeen years of age, laughed at the playfulness of those who obviously had complete control over their element. His fist glowed, a visible indication of his power, but the judges obviously didn't think it

enough.

He saw them gather and hold a brief discussion, then head in his direction. In order to ward them off and avoid embarrassment, he opened for a split-second the dam through which his power had only been trickling.

A vivid flash of light was emitted from his fist. The others in the stadium were temporarily blinded and he smiled inwardly as they blinked and rubbed their eyes, trying to clear away the spots. After a few seconds the judges looked inquisitively toward him and he smiled, condensing the light and forcing it into a tiny, powerful beam that danced between his palms.

They turned from Yen Sa and instead directed their questioning toward Zhen Feng Qui, who stood with his arms crossed, slouching lazily and looking as though he awaited them.

"Have you control over your element?" they asked.

"But of course," he said. "Problem is, my element is poisonâ€"rare and extremely unorthodox."

"Is there a way you can demonstrate and prove this?" they asked skeptically.

The tall man held up one finger, then bent to pluck a blade of grass from the turf.

The vine in front of Ming fell limply to the ground as she hunched, clutching her stomach and her head.

"Sorry, my queen," he said, slightly alarmed and feeling chagrined for his lack of sensitivity regarding her element. But she waved her hand, indicating for him to continue.

He held the grass high on display. It instantly withered, its color draining away as its every cell died.

"That is impressive, Mr...Zhen?" said the head judge.

"You can drop the 'Mr. '"

"But how will this aid our queen? Can you poison enemies from afar?"

"Of course not. However, I am immune to and can easily detect the presence of any toxin. Besides which, I can create it and use it to cover my weapon and make a simple dart deadly or incapacitating, in any degree."

"Very good," said the judge smiling.

Zhen turned his head to the side, providing his profile as he placed his fists on his hips and puffed out his chest, adopting a ludicrously heroic stance. "But more importantly, I can be the official royal food tester."

Chuckling rippled through the participants who were close enough to hear. The stern woman frowned, then turned with renewed vigor to

another who was not conjuring. He fidgeted and his discomfort increased as the judge descended upon him like an enraged falcon.

"Young man, why are you not displaying your talent?"

He avoided her accusing stare. "I-I can't," he admitted.

Lian burst into inconsiderate laughter, the water he'd been sculpting splashing onto the ground. "Who would come today if he couldn't use his element?" he asked scornfully.

"Who would enter if he couldn't use his element?" countered Zhen.

Ming blushed slightly, folding her hands and studying the base of her vine, her head still throbbing from the echoes of the grass's scream.

The participant who had been singled out, having turned a remarkable shade of crimson, fled the arena, trailed by boos and heckling.

The judges converged upon the final unproven person. Kei Sa's head was lowered, her white hood veiling her face.

"Well, young lady?" demanded the female judge.

Kei Sa lifted her head, raising her right hand and holding it, palm forward and fingers spread, just in front of her face. In a decisive instant, she clenched it into a fist.

Throughout the arena, all summoning ceased, the effects and manifestations of the elements abruptly vanishing.

Silence reigned.

Vendetta whirled to face her, anger coloring his face.

Rah Cai Yue laughed, shattering the chilly silence and freeing everyone's breath.

Zhen Feng Qui punched his friend's shoulder. "If she doesn't make it, we'll know it was rigged."

"Indeed," Lian said.

14. VII

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

VII.

* * *

><p>Two days later, the arena overflowed as the sun blazed unsympathetically. Each fighter had been invited; they stood in random order around the perimeter of the field, each holding his weapon.<p>

Jer Rod stepped from the blessed shade, folding his hands and nodding his head to the crowd, which hushed rapidly, eager to hear the announcement of members.

"The weather does not smile upon us today, does it? Yet we should smile upon every fighter that has gathered. Even if he was eliminated, or if he was not chosen to be a member of the Queen's Honor Guard, he is an admirable representative of his people, and he should forever be proud of his participation." The emperor began the applause and the crowd joined him, complete with cheers and encouragement to individual fighters from those who knew them.

"Now, I present, in the order of rank, the Queen's Honor Guard. Kei Sa!"

She stepped forward, crossing the twin short swords she carried and bowing when she took her place in the center of the arena. The crowd was divided in their reaction: prejudice preventing some from acknowledging her, shock at a woman earning the primary spot distracting others, and wild applause erupting from those who appreciated the efforts of the former slave and recognized her skill.

Hua Quy Ling couldn't help but smile.

"Li Wei Yong!"

The general waved his sword, a smile gracing his face. He stood beside Kei Sa, good-naturedly murmuring a congratulation to the woman, who reciprocated it.

Standing in his place in line, Captain Lan Yiao Nih rolled his eyes. "Obviously," he muttered.

"Yuen Ming!"

She smiled cordially and took her place next to her husband.

The crowd and some fighters lacked understanding or were resentful that she had taken a spot that she did not deserve, and the cheers were awkward.

Her smile faltered.

"Tieh Chen Yi!"

The fighter from Sapphire Coast stepped out of line.

Standing a few places to the left, Lian nudged Zhen, who was, naturally, standing beside him. He loudly called, "Oh, it's our yokel friend!"

Tieh Chen Yi whirled in provocation. He narrowed his eyes and shot a look that proclaimed, That name is not better!

The friends laughed as Chen Yi took his place in line.

"Ta Lian Shi!"

Lian, still laughing, raised his hands in triumph, each bearing one of his unique weapons. Curved knives were joined at the handle, turned in opposite directions to form an s. He spun them like propellers, the metal blades of his real weapons reflecting the sun in vicious flashes.

Tieh Chen Yi shook his head slowly. "Oh, great," he uttered, sarcasm tainting his voice.

Lian smiled fiendishly as he stepped beside Chen Yi.

"Hua Quy Ling!"

He blinked a few times, then stepped forward, shocked by his high ranking. His katana hung limply by his side as he took his place, until Lian motioned with his weapons for Quy to demonstrate. He slashed through a few moves with his weapons, and Lian nodded.

"Rah Cai Yue!"

Ever the showman, he embraced the crowd with a grin and a salute with his sword. His cheers were somewhat higher-pitched than the others' had been...

"Vendetta!"

He smiled shallowly, demonstrating his proficiency with the sword, but the crowd sensed that he was not as friendly a person, and his cheers were half-hearted.

"Lan Yiao Nih!"

He smirked, taking his place in line.

Li Wei Yong groaned, covering his eyes with one hand. Ming narrowed hers and kicked him in the ankle. He grunted, lifting his foot off the ground.

The queen turned to her other side, and smiled sweetly at Tieh Chen Yi. He raised his eyebrows, disturbed, wondering if his girlfriend would suddenly begin to treat him in such a manner if they were married.

"Tempest!"

He sent his nanchaku through a few moves that were second nature as he walked to his spot.

Nai Do Xian swallowed, trying to convince himself that he wasn't disappointed. "Getting pretty low on chances," he said to himself, his lips scarcely moving and no one else hearing him. "I knew the general was wrong."

"Zhen Feng Qui!"

"Finally," he said, not having been the least bit worried.
"Congratulations, self."

He left his sword sheathed, juggling darts to the delight of the crowd.

"Nai Do Xian!"

He raised his head, smiling inwardly, but his calm sniper exterior didn't flinch. He left his crossbow prominently strapped to his back, and pulled out his curved sword.

"Yen Sa!"

He sighed, disappointed. "Last." Carrying his sword without flourish, he stepped to the end of the line.

The crowd rose to their feet, claiming their long-needed heroes with unbridled ovation.

Kei Sa looked down the row, seeing brilliantly talented fighters, but instead of a group, they were thirteen individuals, prejudiced against even each other. A lot of work waited in the near future.

* * *

><p>Scattered about the council's conference room, the newly formed honor guard's members seemed as individual as any ever could. The temperaments and mannerisms of each were evoked in the short wait they'd had until the top three entered to call their first meeting to order.<p>

Vendetta, legendarily choleric with two witnesses of his temper in the very room, had been left alone to stand against the wall. Nai Do Xian and Tempest sat silently waiting, which prompted Lan Yiao Nih to smirk at them amusedly, chewing the end of his pen.

Yen Sa stood, glancing around awkwardly; he hadn't met any of his new colleagues prior to the tournament. Hua Quy Ling also stood, his arms crossed, teeth clenched, and eyes slit, brooding for a reason no others could guess.

Rah Cai Yue had commandeered the emperor's chair and listened as Zhen Feng Qui recounted some humorous, likely exaggerated incident. Zhen leaned on the table, his ankles crossed, leaving a handprint on the frosted glass that Che Sa would not be happy to clean.

However, if Che Sa had seen Ta Lian Shi, she would have had a conniption. He slouched in one mahogany chair, his booted foot resting upon the table, flecks of dried mud from its sole dusting the surface. Having the fit in Che Sa's place was Tieh Chen Yi.

"Has no one explained to anyone in Onyx Coast the concept of manners?" he asked as Kei Sa, Li Wei Yong and Li Yuen Ming entered.

He stopped his lecture and turned toward them. "Ma'am, sir, my queen," he said in greeting.

The three took their customary seats. Ming turned to Cai Yue, who sat beside her, still in her brother's chair. "You don't sit there," she said, wiping at Zhen's hand print.

"Actually," clarified Wei Yong to all the room's occupants, "we'd like you to sit in order across the table."

They found their seats quickly, Cai Yue circling the table to reach his. "I have been relegated," he said to Quy Ling as he sat.

"Yeah," Quy said softly, his attention not fixed on those who sat beside him.

"You sit in the order you have been assigned," said Ming, "but each of you is only subordinate to three. Kei Sa's orders fall first, then General Li's, then mine. Though the council ranked you based upon their determination of your worth, you are not subordinate to those ranked above you. You are, however, to treat each other with the utmost respect." At her last sentence, Ming directed her gaze toward Zhen Feng Qui. He simulated a shocked expression, then purposely avoided her meaning and stood.

"As the eldest of us young ones, as the two former Lin Kuei are my only elders here, I deserve the most respect besides them, and I demand that you all refrain from petty squabbling amongst yourselves."

"Zhen," Ming said, her voice weary.

"What? That's not what you meant?" He melodramatically sank back into his chair. "I don't know if I will ever recover from such a hurtful accusation."

Ming sighed and ignored him. "You all know who I am, and who General Li is, and therefore why we have authority over you. It was decided before the tournament that the Honor Guard would need a leader, and that Wei Yong and I would be second and third, completing the hierarchy of the group. However, Kei Sa earned her spot as much as each of you earned yours. She used to be my handmaiden, and she is the person on this planet that I trust the most. More importantly, she outclassed you all with her fighting skills."

Captain Lan tapped his pen against his cheekbone. "So she really is the best fighter on all of Mandalore. I suppose those she's whipped in the past don't feel quite so bad anymore."

"She's the best who entered the tournament, undoubtedly," agreed Ming. "If there's a better, she did not show herself."

"She?" asked Lian.

"Herself?" questioned Do Xian.

"Uh-oh, my friends," said Zhen, raising his hands, palms outward, in a gesture of caution. "We've pledged ourselves to a sexist."

"Feminist," corrected the queen haughtily, raising her chin. "Kei Sa, Edenia's Kitsune, Yuen Po...what would become of us without such women?" She glanced sideways at Quy and waved her finger at him. "You would be headless," she said matter-of-factly.

He shrugged, acquiescing.

"The finest instructor on our planet is also a female: the Oracle."

"You called dear," said a rich, melodious voice.

They jumped, their voices and arguments lost as they turned to stare at the doorway in which she stood.

The pale light that had enveloped her upon her arrival faded quickly; even without it, and masked in her assorted mortal raiment, her aura of divine power was unmistakable.

"You thought I would entirely miss the formation of such an important group, featuring even two of my students?"

She stepped forward, and every eye was fixed upon her demanding presence. "You are our finest hope for the protection of this galaxy from evil. You will learn the ways of evil, you will learn to counteract the ways of evil, and you will oppress evil in every way. They will set their sights upon you, but you will not only evade, you will conquer them. You will foil their every attempt at dominion, and you will be revered throughout the planets because of it. The temptations and the challenges will be unbelievable, but you must stay strong. You must do what is righteous; you must not be tainted in any way.

"It is my hope that you will serve our Creator and spread his ways with every step, that all those you encounter will strive to emulate your every way and belief.

"Kei Sa, you have begun to breach the wall that separates you from understanding. Never before have you had such opportunities to make things the way they should be, and use your powers to the fullest. Ming, I warn you again to avoid the errors of pride. You are capable of all that shall be required of you. Doubt shall help you to succeed only in ruin.

"To all of you, the best wishes and love of myself and those I represent." With a deep bow and a glimmer of light, she was gone, as startlingly as she had appeared.

"You don't see that every day," said Zhen, rubbing his chin.

"You cannot be fazed, can you?" Tempest commented.

"Well," he said, "I grew up on Onyx Coast." He shrugged. "And around this guy," he added, pointing at Lian, "who finds a new way to try to kill himself every other day."

Lian shrugged, and the ten lower-ranking members laughed. Then, turning their attention back to their superiors, they saw Ming had shielded her face with one hand, apparently lacking the will to continue the meeting or their debate.

"Following such a guest, I suggest we adjourn this meeting," said Kei Sa. "Tomorrow, two hours after dawn, assemble on the beach and we shall begin training."

The Honor Guard began to leave, filing out while sharing their impressions of the visitor. Passing Rah Cai Yue, who remained seated, Lian waved his hand in front of the other's unfocused eyes. Getting no reaction, he said, "Cai Yue!"

The priest started, then looked up. "Oh, are we leaving?"

* * *

><p>Stepping out of the conference room, Hua Quy Ling leaned against the wall and sulked, a resentful frown darkening his face.</p>

"Quy," said Zhen lightly, passing him as he left. "You just made the most elite group of fighters in this galaxy. You're supposed to be happy. Smile."

"He is happy," Lian defended jovially. "He's just confused. See, he thought frowning was the way to express joy."

"What's his problem, anyway," said Lan Yiao Nih scornfully.

Quy Ling crossed his arms. "I can't believe they let them in."

"Who?" asked Lian.

"The Lin Kuei."

"Oh," groaned Zhen. "Look, we've all had some problems with the Lin Kuei. You don't see us brooding about it. I trust the council's judgment."

"My problem is not with the Lin Kuei. It's with Vendetta and Tempest specifically."

"So they were the top two, and they've probably done more than the others. Does that mean we should all have grudges?"

Hua Quy Ling sighed angrily. "They killed my parents."

Zhen raised his eyebrows and self-consciously ran his fingers through his short dark hair. "Oh...sorry."

The three that had been grilling him turned to leave but found themselves facing one of the Lin Kuei in question, Tempest. They backed away, fleeing the confrontation.

"Tempest," growled Quy. "I wish I could apologize for talking about you behind your back, but it wouldn't be sincere."

Tempest lowered his head. "Hua Quy Ling." He breathed deeply. "You have my deepest regrets and apologies. No excuse could ever be sufficient for my actions in the past. This is my only hope of restitution: to protect the queen and aid the people I have formerly wronged. You shall likely never believe me, but I feel true remorse for the things I have done."

"Don't expect an apology from Vendetta. He has no regrets. He never will. It cannot be comforting to you that I, the only of the three with guilt or the desire to apologize, am the only of the three that did not lay a hand on your parents."

"Actually," Quy said, relaxing slightly, "it does help somewhat. Thank you."

Tempest bowed slightly, and Quy Ling respectfully reciprocated it, a slight portion of his anger subsiding.

* * *

><p>"Ming," said Kei Sa. "Are you well?"<p>

"She had to chastise me in front of everyone, didn't she?" The queen's eyes were narrowed in anger.

"Ming, she meant no harm," soothed Kei Sa. "It would be wise to heed her words."

"I know to listen to her, Kei Sa. But in front of everyone?"

"They think no less of you."

Ming stared at the table.

"Ladies," cut in Wei Yong. "Perhaps we should focus on the task at hand?"

"You're right," Ming said, rubbing her face. "What do you think of them?"

"I think we have a better chance of getting the washouts from the army to work as a team," the general said.

"Don't be so harsh or quick to judge," reprimanded Kei Sa.

"Of course, the washouts would never have a fraction of the talent," he continued as though Kei Sa hadn't spoken. "In all honesty, we've gathered the most brilliant skill and potential, but it's going to be excruciating to get them to cooperate." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Maybe I'm just leery of the Lin Kuei."

"Aren't we all?" asked Ming. "I did fight their inclusion, but I had no one to fill the ranks who could have ever worked."

"I sense no duplicity about them," said Kei Sa. "Some of the others in the tournament were obviously participating only for their own glory. The two from Onyx Coast and Captain Lan in particular had some selfishness about them, but they're not bad people, not charlatans using this for fame. The Lin Kuei seem to want to use their powers for the good of the people, at last. Tempest especially. Even Vendetta..."

"I just find it hard to believe. He's a little more than caustic," said Wei Yong.

"Kei Sa, is there any chance they could be hiding their deceit?" asked Ming.

The leader of the Honor Guard shook her head slowly, reflecting. "Not without the help of something tremendously powerful."

"Even so," said Wei Yong. "Let's not let our guard down."

"Absolutely not," agreed Kei Sa.

Ming nodded.

"Well," said Wei Yong, standing and stretching. "We have a lot to do tomorrow, and nothing more we can do now."

Wei Yong and Ming walked out, she still in a resentful mood, he pushing their anxiety to the back of his mind and trying to make her laugh. Kei Sa sat for a moment longer, staring at her reflection in the glass and searching her senses once more for any sign of treachery. Finding none, she stood, shaking her head.

She was lost in thought as she exited the room, her mind so intently focused on her worries and her attempts to confirm or debunk them that she did not notice the figure who waited just outside the door until he called her name in a sullen voice. Although she was startled, she was hardly surprised, and her stoic composure did not falter as she faced Hua Quy Ling.

He inclined his head toward the passage, indicating a long-gone member. "So that's this Yen Sa," he said bitterly, spitting the name.

Kei Sa glanced at the ground, slightly perplexed. "Is there a problem?"

"Why him? What's this astounding quality of his that makes him so much better than I?"

Kei Sa raised her eyebrows. "Unparalleled electronic expertise?"

"What?" he exclaimed, his voice involuntarily rising to a volume that rang through the hall and embarrassed both of them. He blinked, looking away from Kei Sa in chagrin. "So he's not...you know..."

"He's a friend, helping me with a project. It is not my fault that the ideas you conjured in your paranoia have caused you such inexcusable rancor." Kei Sa shook her head and began to leave.

"Kei Sa, please." He sounded uncharacteristically plaintive. "Don't walk away from me."

"What do you want, Hua Quy Ling?" she asked, turning.

"I want you to listen to me." He squeezed his eyes shut, mentally chiding himself for the amount of whine in his voice.

"I am," she said, folding her hands and lifting her head to form direct eye contact.

"Iâ€"" he said, then choked on his words. He pulled his eyes away and she tilted her head, waiting.

"I...I..."

Kei Sa turned and again began to walk away.

"I want you to have dinner with me." Quy blinked, far more stunned than Kei Sa at the words that had forced their way out his mouth.

Whirling back around, Kei Sa almost smiled. "Details?"

Once again, a hidden stroke of genius rescued Quy Ling. "On the beach, an hour before sunset. I'll bring the food. You just bring yourself."

She smiled amusedly, though it seemed to be sincere. "It's a promise."

She finally left, and he stared after her, until the shock from his success and her enchanting presence began to fade.

He stomped his foot and slapped himself on the forehead. "Where am I going to get this food?" he asked himself aloud.

* * *

><p>Just more than an hour before dusk, Hua Quy Ling was a tiny figure pacing on the beach, oblivious to the eager spies that peered down at him from the tower's highest window.</p>

"Oh, I can't hold it anymore!" Li Yuen Ming cried, fidgeting. "I have to go now. Yell at me if she comes."

She darted off toward the bathroom, and Wei Yong laughed at her departing form. He rested his elbows on the middle of the windowsill, leaning over to rest his chin on his wrists and hogging the space. Below, Quy circled the basket of food he had acquired.

Seconds later, Ming returned, looking much refreshed. Wei Yong, glanced at her, then down at Quy, then back to her again. "Ming, you seem to be using the restroom frequently lately."

She bit her lip and avoided his gaze. "Yeah, that. Let's discuss it later."

"Ming, is it important?"

"Oh, look." She pointed out the window, craning her neck. "Kei Sa has arrived!"

He turned his attention back to the scene unfolding below them. Hua Quy Ling's gestures were hilariously nervous, and the general stifled his laughter, both at him and their excitement at the inevitable finally becoming a reality.

"He looks like a fool," commented Wei Yong, not derisively. "She looks as though she's finally encountered a situation that flusters her."

"I want to see," Ming said, trying to crowd her way to the windowsill, but Wei Yong shifted his body subtly, refusing to surrender. "Move your hulk over," Ming commanded. "I can't see." She kicked his shin, and he stumbled aside, grimacing with pain but too stubborn to acknowledge her strength with any sound. "Do you think she'll like the food?" she said, triumphantly claiming her space at

the window.

"Of course," Wei Yong said, holding his throbbing ankle off the ground tenderly. "I suggested it to the boy; therefore, it has been affected by my manly charm."

"Oh great. She'll run screaming."

Wei Yong scowled and shoved her; she nearly fell, lurching away from the window. She regained her balance and aimed a swift slap. He grabbed her arm as it swung out of the apex of her windup, twisting her around and wrapping one hand around her stomach, pulling her into a backward embrace. He leaned down his head and kissed her on the cheek. Then, a sudden observation struck him and he narrowed his eyes suspiciously, purposefully poking at her abdomen.

"...You're getting fat."

"Thanks," she said sarcastically.

"No, really. Ming..."

"Later."

"No," he said firmly, spinning her out of the embrace to face him and clutching her wrists. "Not later. Now."

"It's nothing, Wei Yong," she pleaded, suddenly frantic.

"Nothing? You're not acting as if it's nothing!"

Ming tugged her wrists, trying to free them, but Wei Yong only tightened his grip. "Tell me," he demanded.

She stopped her struggle and hung her head.

"Ming," he said sternly. "Are you pregnant?"

She didn't answer; stray hairs floated across her face as she studied the ground.

"Ming," he emphasized.

"Yes!" she yelled. "Yes, I am. Are you satisfied now?"

"Fine," he answered slowly. "But why didn't you tell me?"

She averted her verdant eyes, and he clenched his teeth.

"Ming, you knew before the tournament, didn't you?"

"Maybe," she whispered.

"You knew you were pregnant, and you fought in the tournament. You didn't tell me so that I wouldn't stop you. Senseless, Ming."

"I had to fight," she defended. "What would they have said if I hadn't? I'm struggling for respect and my very right to rule every day. I had to fight."

"I don't care. What if the child has been damaged?"

"I was careful," she said.

"'Careful'? You were 'careful'? If that was you being 'careful' then you should be able to beat Kei Sa into the ground under normal circumstances, right?"

Ming turned her head away.

"You're going to the doctor now." He marched toward the door, pulling her behind him.

"Now?"

"Now."

"But...what about Kei Sa and Quy Ling?"

He glanced at the ceiling and sighed, then dropped her wrists.

"You're right. Later."

They darted back to the window.

* * *

><p>Chewing on his cheek as Kei Sa chewed on her bread, Hua Quy Ling felt the oppressing silence suffocate him. Sweat trickled down his forehead and he desperately hoped she didn't notice, but with the scrutinizing stare she had fixed upon him, he was certain she did.</p>

He had carefully emphasized every detail, leaving neither wrinkle nor grain of sand on the blanket, eternally grateful to the general for securing the food. He'd wrung his hands with anxiety, and prepared fastidiously until everything had been absolutely impeccable.

Then Kei Sa had come, and he'd frozen.

He frantically tapped his fingers on the ground. She seemed content to continue eating and staring at him in the silence, as though she didn't feel its smothering emptiness.

She finished her bread and pulled up her knees, wrapping her arms around them. The tide washed in with its nightly lullaby, and the sun began to fade, spraying its dying rays across the water. Quy Ling squeezed his eyes shut and searched through his memory for something—anything—that sat on common ground between them.

"Kei Sa," he said, then halted, tension biting back his chosen words.

"Yes?" she asked, tilting her head slightly back to look at him once again.

"You were a slave before I was, born one. What about your parents? Did you know them well?"

She lowered her head, speaking into her knees. "I'm sure no one knows who my father is. My mother I knew quite well. She reared me as much

as she could. When they felt she no longer had worth, they exterminated her. I was nine. Yours?"

"I was ten. Vendetta killed my mother; Emperor Yuen killed my father. They were rebels, I think."

"Must be hard for you to accept Vendetta as an ally and colleague."

"Yes, but I'll try to trust the judgment of the council."

"That would be wise. Vendetta taught you to fight, did he not?" She sipped a glass of water.

"Unfortunately," he growled.

"Unfortunate that you can fight and are now the sixth member of a most honored group?" Her eyes smiled, though her mouth did not. Quy Ling didn't notice her mirth, only her typical distance.

"Unfortunate that I didn't have a less severe teacher. Unfortunate that I owe my talent to his temper."

"We hope he'll control it."

"We're in for trouble if he can't."

Their conversation continued, focusing on shallow topics and the sunset as they talked. When the last light faded, Kei Sa stood.

"I must go now," she said.

"Yeah," he said, standing. She had answered his questions pleasantly, fleshing out a lengthy but mainly polite conversation, and with her continual aloof attitude. He sighed and fidgeted, his hopes that she would come to like him once she knew him crushed. "I've wanted this day to come for years, but you always just ignored me, and now that it has..."

"Hua Quy Ling," she said firmly, "I am grateful that you persevered. I shall see you again soon?"

"Well, we'll see each other every day, now," he said bitterly, certain she was merely polite.

"Not that kind of 'see', " she corrected.

With a start, he looked down into her eyes, the deep cerulean of the ocean and the darkest emerald of the rainforest together sparkling in the declaration of every essence of life above her timidly smiling lips. His disappointment and weariness disappeared in a flash as realization and joy burst forth with all the energy of a supernova.

He smiled.

The Queen's Honor Guard

>by Nyohah<p>

Part 3:

>Extrication
>Twenty-Three Years Before MK1<p>

I.

* * *

><p>A buzz filled the warm air of Yen Sa's cluttered quarters, accented by the rhythmic click of the electronic clock he had built as it cycled through the seconds.<p>

He hunched over the components of his and Kei Sa's project, carefully fitting the last piece together in the circuits he hoped would intensify and help to focus the power of the sunstone imbedded in them. Snapping the cover over the complete prototype, he rose, wiping the sweat from his brow and brushing unused bits of solder from his clothes.

He held the device up to the unusually bright and harsh light emitted from his room's sunstones--their efficiency was multiplied by his presence. The device was ovoid, about a quarter of the size of his palm, with a sunstone nested in the center. Light filtered through the nearly transparent stone, splashing faceted rays onto his black uniform.

"It's bulkier than I had hoped," he said, approaching the woman of fair complexion who waited on a worn chair. He slipped the device into the pocket on the palm of a leather, finger-less glove that had been prepared for it--the sunstone was left bare on both sides--and handed it to the woman.

Hua Kei Sa examined it, then pulled it onto her right hand, flexing her fingers to test the pliability of the leather. "If we ever thought we'd be able to punch while wearing this, it was an eager hope rather than a rational expectation."

"All I can say is it had better work. We've spent almost five years on this. If it's still not right, then I'm going to be forced to absolve our friendship on the premises of your having obviously used mind control to convince me that it would be possible."

Kei Sa smiled inwardly as Yen Sa ranted as he always did when he felt the pressures of testing an invention.

"And what a ludicrous idea it was," he continued. "Certainly we've made technological and spiritual aspects coexist in our society numerous times before, but to think we could do it in a single device? Inane. I don't care what the angels told you in the sphere--"

Kei Sa closed her eyes, focusing her will and not only activating the sunstone, but channeling her life force through it. A beam of gently glowing blue shot from the crystal, resolving itself into a blade congruent to one of Kei Sa's favored short swords.

Yen Sa's mouth hung slack, his ranting silenced. Then he threw his

arms toward the ceiling in triumph. "I'm brilliant!" he laughed as Kei Sa tested her weapon, slashing with the sword and finding that as her body simulated the motions needed for fighting with a real sword, her psyche automatically adjusted the position of the energy blade. It was a bit of a strain, perhaps something that would be costly in battle, especially with the other members possessing weaker mental powers than Kei Sa; if they added a mirror to guide the light in the proper direction, it might lessen the difficulty.

"I knew we would do it, Kei Sa," rambled the thirteenth member of the Queen's Honor Guard, oblivious to anything but his success. "Five years, but undoubtedly worth every minute. We've done it; we've accomplished the impossible, widened the boundaries of scienceâ€"whoa." He halted his celebrations, snatching the electronic clock and tapping its side to ensure that it wasn't malfunctioning again. He compared it to his tiny watch, identical and synchronized with those he had made for the other honor guard members.

"We're late," he said.

Kei Sa deactivated the sword and glanced at her watch. They sprinted from Yen Sa's quarters.

* * *

><p>One of the queen's advisors tapped his fingers on the table's formerly spotless glass surface.</p>

Li Yuen Ming turned her head to face him, the beaded ornaments that hung from her plaited hair swaying from the movement, the glint of light upon her embroidered red satin dress shifting. "They shall be here soon, I assure you," she said sternly.

The advisor raised his eyebrows; the tapping continued.

Between each tap, she could hear slight movements behind her, her husband, and the vacant chair. The nine members of the Queen's Honor Guard arranged in a line behind them seemed to be sharing no less anxiety than she was. The two former slaves had never been late to anything; that sort of action was expected only of Ta Lian Shi and Zhen Feng Qui. In addition to the sheer oddity of the incident, the importance of the meeting had been stressed for days. Where were they?

"My queen," said Nai Do Xian after a substantial wait, his voice soft as though he tried to keep the others on the council from noticing the problem, "it is possible there has been some mishap. Permission to search for Kei Sa and Yen Sa?"

Ming glanced to the high, mahogany-beamed ceiling, then turned slightly to face him and nodded. "Please do."

The sniper bowed slightly, then swiveled and walked in a hurried manner to the door. As he began to open it, it was flung inward from the other side, and Yen Sa stumbled in.

Her anxiety was washed away with relief that faded into irritation.

* * *

><p>As Yen Sa looked up, he forgot that he, for a moment, had meant to apologize to Lieutenant Nai for slamming the door into him.</p>

Everyone in the room—“all the council members, all the rest of the honor guard, the queen, and worst of all, the general—stared at him, expectancy lingering in their eyes. Kei Sa stepped behind him, and he tried to force a smile.

“Where have you been?” the queen asked, a touch of annoyance seeping into her tone.

Yen Sa’s grimacing smile twitched and faltered as he discarded numerous renditions of a possible explanation, but Kei Sa removed any need for him to explain. She stepped around him, raising her right hand and activating the device. Its cool azure glow colored her pale face and the room’s occupants stared.

“It’s pretty,” said Li Wei Yong, “but what is it?”

“It’s what we’ve been working on for five years now,” Yen Sa said, eagerness unfreezing his tongue. “See, the circuitry I’ve designed around the central sunstone should intensify its effects when we—”

“Kei Sa, what is it?” amended the general. Yen Sa shut his mouth slowly and tried to ignore the insult.

“I suppose,” she said slowly, “it’s a life-force sword.”

“As I was trying to say,” Yen Sa began again, accelerating his speech yet more, “we activate the stone and along with our psyche, the circuitry focuses and intensifies the light—”

“We?” asked Li Wei Yong, raising his eyebrows in doubt. “Can anyone but Kei Sa manage such a thing with his mind?”

Yen Sa nodded. “Theoretically, anyone trained in using their psyche to summon an element should be able—”

“Have you tested your theories, Yen Sa?” The general enunciated concisely, in slight derision.

Yen Sa would have taken the action to be an insult to his common sense, but the fact that the general was correct melted possible anger into embarrassment. “I would have eventually...” he said, looking down to the floor.

The general sighed. “Yen Sa...”

“I’ll do it now,” he said, looking up sharply in a burst of new confidence and beckoning for Kei Sa to give him the glove. He pulled it on, closed his eyes, and activated the sunstone. Light began to flicker into the shape of a sword, and Yen Sa could feel it begin to take the shape of his personal weapon, exactly how he wanted it. If he could do it, the general would have to accept the invention as worthy of his time.

Then the blade shattered, flinging intensified beams of light in all

directions. In the instant he felt the blade erupt, Yen Sa let the sunstone fall dormant, flinging his hands forward and mentally catching the deadly manifestations of his element before they could harm anything. He opened his eyes and gently diffused the light shards into the normal, harmless spectrum, smiling weakly at the scattered council members. They had begun to duck for cover, some crowding under the table before realizing the glass would do nothing to stop the beams and that they could not have hoped to dodge a danger moving at the speed of light.

"It's, uh, harder than I thought it would be," he said, cringing at the glares of the others.

Li Wei Yong climbed back into his chair, scowling. "Yen Sa, it is not my intention to be cruel, but we do not have time for your little toys. You have delayed this meeting long enough."

Yen Sa felt his face begin to flush at the general's words. Kei Sa sought to give him a reassuring smile as she sat, but he avoided her gaze and stepped to the end of the line.

Last, youngest, always scolded for something...why had he let Kei Sa drag him into this?

The queen, with a slight shake of her head, turned her attention to the visitor at the table. He was a gaunt man, with ever-darting eyes that seemed to search for threats among the council members before him.

"I'm sorry for the delay, Mr. Tse," she said. "Would you please explain your situation to the council?"

Tse nodded sharply and swallowed. "I am a person of little importance, certainly no one a planetary council such as you would typically concern yourselves with. I was a fisherman, but I have more recently been a colonist."

Yen Sa studied the man more thoroughly as he revealed the information about his past. A normal fisherman would perhaps have the attentiveness about him that the man exhibited, the unceasing vigilance that Yen Sa had recognized in the honor guard's sniper. But the haunted look of his eyes suggested fear was the cause of his behavior, not training or nature. The man was the slightest quaver from plunging into unchecked paranoia.

"You see," Tse continued, his shoulders hunched in tension, "when the announcement about the future colonies came, I convinced my wife it would be a way to a better life. We held our own, made enough to support ourselves, but there is always the hope of more, of a life beyond the norm. We thought in a new place, we might for once be the best and gather in the business others sucked from us here on Mandalore. So we joined one of the ships, just a family among many. We were all frightened by the prospect of entering the portal blindly, but we came through it with no harm done. What awaited us somewhat dashed our hopes."

Yen Sa imagined the man's story was not unlike that of most of the colonists'. Some that had gone were the adventurous type, willing to go anywhere just for the sake of bragging rights. However, had they been grouped, and he guessed they eventually were due to their

behavior and attitude likely annoying everyone else, they would have filled less than a ship. Each of the Mandalorian ships was slightly different than the others, but all had possessed the capacity for about one hundred with limited baggage after the necessary supplies were loaded. The bit of army sent had occupied four ships, leaving fourteen to be filled by hopeful pilgrims.

"Tell us, Mr. Tse," prompted the queen, for he had halted, searching for the correct way to describe his impressions. "What did you find?"

"We found not the barren worlds, and rare inhabitable planets known to us, but a vast scattering of life. Thousandsâ€"no, hundreds of thousands, millions evenâ€"of planets, almost a galaxy's worth, and a far more fertile one than ours. They were all unified in a gargantuan government, seemingly as ancient as it was large. We found no worlds uninhabited that could be lived upon, so we settled for a few that seemed under-populated and on the far edge of the government's reach. Five colonies total. You must find it terribly hard to believe that such a place exists. I almost can't, and I've seen it myself.

"Their reliance on advanced technology is incredible," he continued. "They seem to have no appreciation for the wonder of life, having scientifically categorized it to the point it almost ceases to be living. We've encountered little in the way of religion, and what we have seen is pagan at best.

"But that's not important," he said, shaking his head. "I am here because there has been increasing hostility toward us. Our little bits of army have done the best they can, but sometimes the savagery is overwhelming. Those that attack can be little better than thieves and scoundrels, pirates. They have no morals, and seem to delight in destroying us. Why we have been selected I have no idea.

"It became clear very soon that we needed reinforcements, and we decided to send back a single ship with a skeleton crew. After my wife and children were slaughtered by those murdering ruffians, I agreed to come along." He lowered his head, his shoulders hunching more, to nearly hide his head.

"You mean to say that our colonies are in danger and Mandalorian people are being killed," prompted the queen, wanting confirmation of her summary.

Tse jerked his head in a brief nod. "You must help us. It's a nightmare out there."

"Why don't you all just come home?" asked the general. "You are obviously losing."

"We wish we could, General. But you haven't seen their ships. Huge, impenetrable. Battle ships with weapons that shoot...light, like that...thing he had, when it exploded." Tse pointed at Yen Sa, his hand trembling. "Half our ship was exposed to vacuum by their blasts as we tried to escape. It will never be usable again."

Yen Sa blinked as the man pointed at him, and raised his right palm, staring at the device that rested in it. So there was great potential behind his invention, and in a manner he hadn't considered. If he could manage to make the light released in short, focused beams, with

his psyche and with another device, as a projectileâ€"

"Gentlemen," the general said loudly, startling Yen Sa, and causing him to drop his hand back to his side, a slight burn filling his cheeks as he realized he'd been daydreaming, in a juvenile mistake that had beenâ€"to his chagrinâ€"typical of his conduct in the Queen's Honor Guard for the four years since it had been formed.

"It is obvious," continued the general, "that we must aid our colonies, and either secure their place or bring them home. However, there must be deliberation on the matter of how much aid is needed and how much we can afford to send. Mr. Tse?"

The thin man swallowed. "There's so many of them. They're everywhere, species after species of alien. If they all turned against us..." He shook his head. "We need a huge force. The whole army, maybe."

Wei Yong raised his eyebrows, tilting his head slightly to the side. "We cannot send the entire army, you realize, or there will be none left to guard our home. If the opposition is as substantial as you think, we may need more than what we have spare at the moment." He turned to the council. "But if we take some of the stationed troops from other planets, how will they react?"

"I believe," said the new head political advisor, replacing Mr. Chan, who had been sent to the senate, "we can convince them that, due largely to their aid and cooperation, of course, the need for such extreme protection has passed. If we make them feel proud of the accomplishment, we should be able to remove some of the troops without much fuss."

"But there is always great risk," argued Wei Yong, "as long as the evil that dwells just outside our border exists." As he spoke, a tangible wash of energy entered the room. Its occupants glanced briefly at the energy's destination, and seeing it form into a white-clad fighter, ignored it.

"But we have been in a state of utter peace for three years and counting, General," said the advisor.

=In that you are wrong,= mewed the energy.

"Honor?" questioned the queen, turning her head in a quick motion that thrashed her beads against the face.

=We have just been informed that Centaurions are under attack,= said Honor. =It seems Shokans have taken opportunity to further their barbaric spat, and are aiding our enemy Kahn.=

The political advisor rose in shock. Li Wei Yong pushed away from the table, then jumped over his toppled chair. The honor guard sprinted the short distance from the council room to their headquarters. Yuen Ming ran into her dressing room.

And when he reached his locker, Yen Sa stared at the device on his hand. He began to pull it off, then stopped, and snorted self-derisively as he wished he'd for once been able enough to produce something of worth. He ripped it off his hand and raised it, ready to throw it into his locker so it could be lost in the mess of junk that cluttered its bottom.

"Don't throw it, Yen Sa," said a soft voice. "It might break and then it could take us another five years to make it."

"It doesn't work, Kei Sa," he said.

"It does work. Maybe not as well as we might hope, but have faith. We'll make it work. And then they'll all want one."

Yen Sa glanced up and away from her, staring at the indigo energy that crackled and throbbed as Rah Cai Yue crafted a portal. He turned to Kei Sa, and held out the device. "Do you want it? You could use it now, and then they'd be amazed much sooner, and our job would be all the easier."

Kei Sa took the device, but shook her head slightly. "I'm not coming. I will remain here, sustaining the portal while Cai Yue fights and anchoring it to this side so Kahn cannot trap you."

"What?" He exhaled quickly. "We need you."

"I cannot risk the health of my child," she explained, rubbing the swelling abdomen that held what would be her second baby.

"Indeed not," said Hua Quy Ling, holding his katana in his left hand and wrapping his right arm around his wife's shoulders.

Yen Sa half-smiled. "Just what we need. Another honor guard-bred child."

"What we need," said Quy Ling, "is to leave." He gestured to the portal, which stabilized as he spoke, fully created.

Yen Sa grabbed his sword from his locker, and followed the others, leaping through the portal.

16. II

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

II.

* * *

><p>Rah Cai Yue landed hard on both feet, the force of his portal shoving him down into the tall, tan grass that eclipsed his crouched form. He stood, breathing heavily from the exhaustion of maintaining the portal, and stepped toward the rest of the honor guard, the wide grass caught underfoot rustling overbearingly in the unnatural silence, the white cloud formed by his breath staining the abnormally cold air.<p>

He released control of the portal to Kei Sa and focused his concentration on the situation after briefly realizing that, although she had no direct control over the gravitational forces necessary to create the portal, she would likely have an easier time maintaining it than he did.

Ahead of him, the eleven other warriors surveyed the area, their faces reddened by the chill. It was too cold, too quiet. Kahn's work, no doubt, suppressing the life of the planet, but surely he had not already won. Where were the Centaurions, the Shokans, the army?"

"Where's the battle?" asked Li Wei Yong, his left hand clutching the hilt of his sword in a reverse grip, a gap of glinting metal protruding from the sheath.

Cai Yue closed his eyes, studying the disrupted energy of the planet. "Another portal," he noted, raising a finger to point to the right of theirs, past an area of dead trees, killed, broken, and scattered by a flood decades earlier. "Not far, really."

"Must be far enough," said Ta Lian Shi. "Are you sure?"

"Hush," Nai Do Xian commanded suddenly, raising a hand and creasing his eyebrows. "I think I may be hearing something. It's faint, but it's coming from that direction." He shrugged. "Might as well, right?"

The general nodded slowly. Ming did also, though hers was jerky, her face pale.

As the honor guard headed toward the trees, Cai Yue slid his sword from its sheath on his back, holding it loosely at his side. With a few quick steps he caught up to Ming and paced beside her. "You going to be all right?"

She swallowed, tightening her grip on her double-bladed staff. "I can't hear them." She caressed the tip of a tall blade of grass. "It's as though they're utterly lifeless."

"It's as though the whole planet's dead, Ming." He shook his head. "If we don't pull together to fight for it, it will stay that way."

"I'll be fine," she said curtly, brushing her hand across her forehead to push back loose hairs that didn't exist.

In some ways, she really hadn't changed since they were kids, still taking offense at the slightest things if they even hinted at a scolding of her. Cai Yue shook his head and let her walk away.

Before them, as they entered the grave of gray-parched wood, the bed of grass fell away into a valley, filled with the madness of four full armies slaughtering the members of those they opposed. The clamor of clashing metal, flesh, and rock coupled with the screams, bellows, and grunts of those who fell was muffled, faded to a whisper in a meager distance, swallowed by air that refused to break its deathly stillness for even a sound wave.

The battle was vicious and personal. At first glance, Cai Yue saw a Mandalorian crushed by a Shokan, a mutant of Kahn's army's skull fractured by a Centaurion hoof, a Mandalorian decapitated by a mutant, a mutant eviscerated by a Mandalorian.

He tore his eyes from the horror and looked to the nexus of roiling

gravitational energies. The portal he'd detected was in its infant stages, just a small, angry-looking vortex, but Cai Yue sensed an overwhelming will directing its creation and an abominable amount of force built up behind it. He knew immediately it was not intended to slip a few more mutants and Shokans into the battlefield. The portal was meant to let through the evil that would personally secure control of the planet.

"Shao Kahn's coming through that," he said simply.

"Then is there any question what our goal is?" Hua Quy Ling asserted, his gaze on the opening portal.

"If you get me close enough," Cai Yue breathed, stepping forward, "I think I can close it."

"How are you going to do that?" Lan Yiao Nih's remark was based on a firm sense of reality, and solidified the doubt in most of the fighters.

But Cai Yue just shrugged slightly. "I have no idea." He whirled to face the others. "We have to try." He flicked his sword. "I have to do something."

Tieh Chen Yi took a step out of the loose line the honor guard had formed and nodded toward the priest. "I'll help."

Cai Yue glanced sideways, to the ground. He raised his left palm in a halting gesture. "How?"

"Well, your element is just a branch of mine, gravity being an attribute of the earth. I figure that the relationship will give our energies some sort of compatibility. Since the planet isn't doing anything, its energy has been frozen but not destroyed, so I awaken some of it, use it to fuel your psyche, and you destroy the portal." He looked down and spoke more quietly. "...in theory anyway."

Zhen Feng Qui's mouth twitched. "You're starting to sound like Yen Sa," he commented, a faint smile cracking through.

He was ignored.

Li Wei Yong raised both hands and attention was redirected to him. "So the plan you're proposing consists of us shepherding you two to the other side of a valley filled with war so that you can attempt the untested and likely impossible?"

Chen Yi scratched above one ear. "Basically."

The general pulled his sword from its sheath. "Desperation is a dangerous thing."

* * *

><p>The Queen's Honor Guard carefully climbed down the incline leading to the valley, painfully aware of their lack of defense and heading for what seemed to be the emptiest route to the portal. It was still filled with and flanked by dozens of enemies, and dozens more allies that needed to be avoided and protected, further hampering their chances for success. However, it was less filled than

the rest of the valley, which, conveniently for the honor guard, was so packed with fighting that none of the warriors had the chance to attack anything other than what was immediately beside them. Therefore, they could not worry about the twelve warriors making their way into the valley, no matter who they were and how good they were supposed to be.<p>

Tieh Chen Yi found the descent less complicated than the others did. The smooth dip caused by the river whose flood had destroyed the only trees of the plain broke into a crumbling rock face, then a hill of sliding stones. The earth had been shattered and moved by an earthquake recent enough for him to still feel its repercussions in the earth beneath him. A flick of his wrist wrapped his whip's end around one of the numerous withered roots protruding from the short cliff, and he swung to a lower level with ease.

As he slipped past Lan Yiao Nih, the captain glared at him, then returned to frowning at the battle. He muttered, "We need Kei Sa," then swore loudly as Tempest, having twisted his ankle on a shifting rock, fell into him, pushing the captain to the ground.

"Watch it, old man," Captain Lan said, lurching to his feet and retrieving a wide dagger.

Chen Yi wrapped his whip around his right arm and hopped backward, extending the left to the fallen ninja. "Are you all right, sir?"

"Fine," said Tempest, accepting the help, "no thanks to the cesspit of hostility some call Captain Lan."

Chen Yi smiled slowly, then swung the rest of the way to the ground. He wrenched the whip from the last root it had been wrapped around and with the same motion caught the arm of a mutant above its blade, jerking it backward and tangling the mutant in the remainder of the whip. He saved one Mandalorian's life with the action, and likely numerous others' by cleaving the mutant's throat with his waved dagger.

With a vicious pull he unwound the whip, sending the mutant's carcass rolling across the battlefield, only to be crushed underfoot by a dying, staggering Shokan. As his whip cracked across another mutant's bare, jaundice chest, rending a trail of blood, he heard an arrow whistle past his ear and jerked his head sideways to follow its path. It imbedded itself through a Shokan's eye and into its brain cavity. Chen Yi ducked a swing by the injured mutant, glancing to the other side to see Nai Do Xian crouched at the top of the rock pile, another arrow loaded as he evenly acquired another target.

"Good," grunted the fourth honor guard as he parried another swing and ploughed his boot up and into the mutant's stubby nose above its sadistic mouthful of incisors. The sniper was proficient in hand-to-hand combat, but he would do most good away from the battle, and likely be the one Mandalorian able to fell a Shokan by himself.

The mutant's nose was crushed and several of its sharpened teeth broken but the superficial injuries were mere side effects of the kick's intention. Its neck cracked audibly, and the mutant tumbled to the ground.

Chen Yi heard a thump beside him and watched Rai Cai Yue fling his sword through a mutant's abdomen, spilling its intestines; the priest struck from a low stance, throwing his other arm behind him, then stood.

"Ready?" he asked.

Chen Yi nodded. "How shall we go?"

"As quickly as possible," Cai Yue instructed, glancing at the portal, which became larger with every wasted moment, "but not so quickly as the fools we are." Cai Yue flicked his sword into a guard and dashed toward the portal, glancing continuously in every direction, spying for threats.

"And hope the others find the time to keep our enemies off our backs," Chen Yi concluded, and followed him.

The honor guard did what they could, but their enemies weren't apt to fall back in order to allow the fighters to flank their friends. The Mandalorian army, seeing its heroes make an obvious attempt for the portal, managed to muster a renewed effort through their exhaustion. The Centaurions between the pair of honor guard members and the portal began to herd their enemies away from a path to the portal, even at a greater death toll to themselves. Tieh Chen Yi saw the support and gleaned from it and the ever-closer portal a new sense of confidence. All their allies were behind them: the honor guard, Centaurions, armyâ€"

He halted. "Cai Yue!"

Rah Cai Yue jumped, his rhythm broken. He impaled a mutant before turning. "What?"

"Where are the Vyrenchi?"

The priest whirled in search, taking a head off a mutant as he did so. Then both fighters jumped back as a Shokan broke through the Centaurion barrier, heading for them. Chen Yi's confidence dissipated in an instant. He didn't know if the two of them could take one of the monstrous Shokans.

But the Shokan staggered between them, madly waving its four arms, its mouth open as though gasping. Then it fell, no wounds visible.

"I think we found them," commented Cai Yue.

"I was wondering why the Shokans weren't causing more trouble."

"Now is not the time for curiosity. We have a mission."

Chen Yi nodded. "But we are almost there."

The priest smiled and dashed off again. Chen Yi shook his head and followed. Three slain mutants later they stood at the base of a grassy incline that led to the roiling portal. Several other honor guard members had managed to follow them, and began to form a semicircle around them, forming a barrier against attack.

Chen Yi looked up at the portal. "Should we climb?"

Rah Cai Yue shook his head almost casually. "I think we're close enough."

Chen Yi glanced over his shoulder. Behind him, the queen let out a high-pitched, shrieking battle cry that challenged and nearly broke the air's oppressing stillness and whirled her staff. She impaled a mutant on one end, then grazed another's neck with the opposite blade, wrenching the first sideways through the mutant's abdomen at the same time. The blood from the second mutant's jugular splattered Ming's face, and Chen Yi turned back to the priest. "Are you sure we'll be safe? They're getting hit pretty hard back there."

"We don't have time to be safe," said the other, then inhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

Tieh Chen Yi likewise detached his thoughts from the chaos that beset him, pushing his psyche into the earth.

It was still, lacking even the patient throbbing of the stored energy that it painstakingly harbored until the time came to release its fury, as it had in the earthquake that had so recently occurred. Chen Yi could easily stir the dormant energies of a living planet, even mold its wrath to the finest detail, but this planet was ceasing to live. He pushed, pleaded, even tried brute force, but he got no response from the planet. He couldn't even siphon off an insignificant stream; the energy congealed, too massive to be moved at once, too thick to be borrowed from. Kahn's imminent invasion had forced the planet into hibernation, and Chen Yi could do nothing against such power.

He exhaled with an audible moan. "Cai Yue," he coughed. "I'm sorry. I can't get anything."

Rah Cai Yue's face was locked in a grimace, his every muscle tensed as he fought to destroy the currents of the portal. "Give me everything you've got," he uttered, "I don't care if this kills us."

=Because if we fail,= whispered another voice, =everyone else will die.=

At first, Chen Yi thought Rah Cai Yue had managed to form some bizarre link and Cai Yue was hearing the priest's thoughts, but Cai Yue's limbs went slack and he turned to the side.

A Vyrenchi's mental form stood beside them and gestured awkwardly to itself. =We are Acumen,= it said. =We wish we had time to ask permission, Rah Cai Yue, but we must use you as conduit to effectively target portal.=

"Conduit?" whispered Cai Yue, but the Vyrenchi never answered. The priest twitched as the Vyrenchi's energy entered his body.

Then everything flashed.

A split-second later, Rah Cai Yue was a silhouette against the remaining light as a wave of tangible energy rocketed through the

valley and Cai Yue fell to the ground, vomiting.

Tieh Chen Yi dropped to his knees and panted, hearing the Vyrenchi's last sound, a final scream.

"I-it's gone." He blinked rapidly.

Ta Lian Shi stepped forward and slapped him on the shoulder. "And it's a good thing, too."

Chen Yi stared at him in disbelief, then shook his head, standing. "No, no. Not the portal. The Vyenchi!"

"Well," said Lian, "I'll admit that's not a good thing. But look what it's done."

Chen Yi scouted the battlefield, noting the empty space where the portal had been, the Mandalorians collapsed on the ground resting, the Centaurions leaping about in a crude victory parade, and the obvious lack of anything else. "They just disappeared?"

"Not quite, kid," said Lian, kicking the fine gray ash that dusted the valley.

"But what about Acumen?" Bitter reality seared through Chen Yi's soul. "He...died?" Vyrenchi didn't die. They couldn't die, could they?

Hua Quy Ling's voice was quiet. "He used the force of his life energy to save the planet. It was his choice. You two were about to do the same thing."

"Though your explosion would have been a little more bloody, a little less brilliant."

"Zhen," reprimanded the queen. "You're not helping."

The tall man raised his hands, palms out in a gesture meant to calm.

Chen Yi shook his head rapidly and turned away. He knew the sacrifice had been nothing but the noblest act, but he couldn't block the anger and sorrow that welled up in his heart.

17. III

The Queen's Honor Guard

>by Nyohah<p>

III.

* * *

><p>Li Yuen Ming climbed the grassy hill that had just hours earlier led to Kahn's developing portal. With a great sigh she dropped into the tan grass. It was shorter on her side of the valley than it had been on the other, though she could see its height increase near the horizon. But far more important than its heightâ€"and this she relished, a smile spreading on her filthy faceâ€"the grass again

throbbed with life. In fact, she could hear the plaintive cries of the blades that had been trampled, or the ones bathed in blood and pleading for sunlight; they bitterly reminded her of her responsibility.<p>

In the valley below her, ash still blew, drifting into piles from hours of wind. The wounded had been carried away, taken to the army's base on Kloesh. Those that could not walk had been dragged on stretchers bound to Centaurions. Most of the Mandalorians were gone, a few left to pick through the dead. Only the Centaurions in mortal danger had allowed themselves to be taken; most preferred to let their blood run to the ground and mix with the ash, granting them more scars of which to be proud and with which to gain prestige. Of her honor guard, Tempest had a small cut on his arm that needed to be bandaged to stop the bleeding, and Hua Quy Ling had been sliced down the leg just before the battle's end. All other injuries were superficial, though Yen Sa had disappeared somewhere; she didn't know where he had gone.

=Yuen Ming.=

She sat up. "Yes, Honor?" He was fatigued from battle and not projecting his mental form, but she thought she could see the little distortions his presence caused.

=Your brother has arrived.=

"Thank you, Honor." She stood, stretching.

=We will accompany you.=

"I would be delighted for your company." If the Vyrenchi had been a physical being, she would have found him overprotective and crowding. As he wasn't, she often forgot or had no idea whether he was around; that coupled with the fact that outsiders likely did not know he existed made him an excellent bodyguard.

Ming climbed back down the hill, stepping carefully around the bodies that had not yet been carried away. She saw her brother's delegation near the opposite side of the valley, talking to her husband. He and the Edenians that accompanied him wore bright robes, their color shining through the valley like a beacon amidst the browns, grays, and dark red of the former war zone. She made the mistake of glancing down at her clothes and sighed.

Her black fighting dress and the light pants she wore beneath it were rumpled and caked with blood and sweat, dusted with ashes. She guessed that her face and hair fared no better, knowing that she couldn't have gotten all the blood off with the single washcloth she'd been offered.

Slapping her palms together in a futile attempt to clean them, she stepped past Tieh Chen Yi, who sat on one of the boulders that were strewn across the valley with increasing frequency as she approached the rockslide. She began to ask him how he was, then vetoed the thought as she opened her mouth, scrambling for another idea.

"Do you know where Yen Sa is?"

But it was Lan Yiao Nih, standing nearby and surveying the wreckage

who answered her. "Take one guess."

Chen Yi clarified, "I think he set up a lab in the base."

She nodded, then forced out her question. "How are you?"

"Not as bad as Cai Yue. It's just unbelievable. They're not supposed to die. And he was so close..." He kicked at a stone, then half-smiled reassuringly. "I'll be fine."

"It's as if his favorite pet died," muttered Captain Lan, rolling his eyes.

"Some people just aren't as naturally heartless as you." Ming smiled mock-sweetly and stepped away.

Behind them, Emperor Yuen Jer Rod smiled broadly and walked toward her, bypassing his Kitsune bodyguards. "Ming," he said, pressing his hands on her shoulders. "I would kiss you, sister, but I can't seem to find a clean spot."

"If you had been here, you would be filthy as well."

"I'm not quite clean anyway," he replied, shaking ash from his robes. Then his voice sobered. "What do you think of it?"

"It was horrible, Jer Rod. Horrible, but the battle was necessary. How will you punish the Shokans?"

"Somehow," he said, brushing some ash away from a patch of ground with his foot, "I think they've been punished enough. We will, however, interrogate those left on their planet and issue a statement about whether they were involved."

Ming squeezed her eyes shut. "What are you going to tell everyone about this? How are they going to react to the threat of invasion?"

"What are we going to do with your colonists?" he whispered.

Ming lowered her head and took a large breath, holding it for a single moment in an attempt to bolster her strength, but releasing it in a swift exhalation, relaxing her shoulders wearily, defeated. "We go to them, we rescue them, and we bring them back. It was a mistake to even send them." She shook her head slightly, then clenched her fists and looked up at her brother. "He lulled us into complacency, conveniently disappearing then striking at the worst time." The queen cupped filthy hands to a not-quite-so filthy nose as her eyes began to burn, the action muffling her words. "We're fools."

"Everyone makes mistakes, Ming."

She dropped her hands. "And we must correct this one."

"Ming, where will you get the troops? Surely you realize thatâ€œespecially after this debacleâ€œthe other planets will have a fit if you try to takeâ€œ"

"I'm not taking troops from the other planets." She sighed. "I'm taking them from Mandalore."

Jer Rod's brow creased and he tilted his head, slowly closing his eyes. "Ming," he said finally, "without the army, your honor guard... You cannot leave our planet defenseless."

"It won't be defenseless. I'll have some troops here, as many as we loan to the other planets. And I'd hope they would have the audacity to come to our aid if need be. They seem to have the audacity for just about everything else," she muttered.

"I'll talk to them," he conceded. "Hopefully they'll volunteer back some of your men." He sighed and turned away. "I'd try to talk you out of this, but I know that's an impossible occurrence."

* * *

><p>Hangars were loud, chaotic.</p>

She admitted that she had only entered hangars in the occasion of a trip, and if she went somewhere it was almost guaranteed to be a large trip. Still, Ming wanted to scream and silence everyone, then teach them how to do their jobs quietly and orderly.

Her husband didn't help the situation, though she marveled at his ability to issue orders for a dozen unrelated tasks subsequently, while hearing the requests for a dozen more. Ming had been habituated to directing political meetings, and though they seemed every bit as crazy, the politicians with whom she met did not speak all at once or scurry about like homeless vermin as the army did.

Her brother had indeed managed to convince all the planets in his union to 'donate' some of Mandalore's own troops to her, and she had split them, filling gaps in both the planet's defense and the task force she was taking. The largest volunteered group had come from, unsurprisingly, Edenia—the smallest, less than a company and understandably so, from the Centaurions—but the largest force had been stripped from Shokan by Emperor Yuen as their punishment. They had been left with some troops, but not enough to even give pause to an invasion. Surely, they needn't fear their 'ally', Jer Rod had commented in an uncharacteristically malicious moment, leaving the Shokans with the clear message to, in the future, join those who would help and not betray them.

Her four-year-old son—Nei Jen was his name, but her honor guard refused to call him anything but 'baby Li'—tugged at the silk skirt of her dress, whining about the wait. She subconsciously hoisted him up as Kei Sa stepped beside her.

Her former handmaiden and current leader of her honor guard spoke softly. "All supplies have been loaded and counted. The army workers have organized their weapons and themselves, and are beginning to load the weapons. The honor guard is gathering their things. Nai Do Xian is prepping the Aria."

Ming's son pointed at the ship with a smile at its mention. Ming smiled back at him. "Yes, we are going to ride on the ship soon, aren't we?" The Templar Aria was rather small, even for a Mandalorian ship, and it would seem an insect to the battleships Tse had described, she was sure; it lacked even armaments. But its silver hull gleamed proudly, and it was large enough for her honor guard and

a few others.

As she scrutinized it, looking for a sign of ill preparation, what could only be Yen Sa pushed a cart overloaded with technical equipment into its open bay. She half-shook her head. "He hasn't given up."

"And he won't," Kei Sa added, instantly knowing of whom she was speaking. "Is Honor here?"

=Yes, Kei Sa.= He materialized before her.

"You are going to gather some Vyrenchi help?"

=We have. Thirteen for nowâ€"we thought it appropriate number.=

"Indeed, Honor." Kei Sa smiled at him. "You did well, Honor."

"Yes, Honor," agreed Ming, seeing in the corner of her eye Tieh Chen Yi beckon her from beside the Aria. She headed in his direction, dodging workers. As she neared him, she observed the girl standing beside him. She wore a simple pastel dress, and her clear blue eyes shyly averted as Ming approached and set down her son, clasping his little hand to ensure he didn't cause any trouble in his impish way.

"My queen," acknowledged Chen Yi with a nod, "this is An."

"An doesn't have a family name?"

He blushed. "Hseh An."

"It's nice to meet you, Hseh An," said Ming with a small bow. The girl smiled bashfully as Nei Jen mimicked his mother's action. "I am Li Yuen Ming."

"I know," she whispered.

Chen Yi spoke quickly. "She wants to come."

"She knows it will be dangerous?"

The young woman nodded; it was a tiny motion.

"Very well," said Ming. "She may come." She glanced over her shoulder. "Your fiancÃ©e does not wish to come, Lian?"

He had stopped behind her, lugging a large bag and the case for his weapons. "Her? Enter a war zone? She would never. Besides she has things to do at home. She doesn't just sit around and cook. We're supposed to be coming back soon, anyway, right?"

"That's the plan. Will you miss her?"

"Some." He shrugged, then grinned. "But I'll have yokel boy to tease about his yokel girlfriend."

"Oh, board the Aria." Ming waved her hand in dismissal.

"Excuse me? No, no, no." He waved both hands. "I will not be associated with anything called the Aria. It's the Templar."

"It's my ship," said Ming. "It's the Aria."

Ta Lian Shi turned to Tieh Chen Yi jerking his head in Ming's direction. "Are you sure you won't reconsider bringing your girlfriend? Exposure to our queen could ruin her."

"I guess you're just not man enough for me," Ming deadpanned, then turned to the ramp that led into her ship, pulling her son with her. Behind her came the sound of Rah Cai Yue's laughter.

"Oh, shut up," Lian said to him, his tone betraying any attempt to fake anger. "If you weren't still obsessed with herâ€""

She walked on.

The blood rushed into her ears, blocking the rest of the conversation, and her heart tore, but what could she do?

She walked on.

* * *

><p>An hour later, Nai Do Xian piloted the Templar Aria from the hanger, and Rah Cai Yue, with the help of Kei Sa, created a portal for all the ships, theirs passing through last.

"Next stop," he said as they approached it, "Edenia and the Interplanetary Association of Royal Babysitters."

Ming sighed.

* * *

><p>Empress Sindel smiled and crouched as best she could, the child growing inside her beginning to hamper her movements. She brushed her hand through Li Nei Jen's tangled hair. "We'll make sure you don't miss your mommy and daddy too much," she said in Mandalorian. "Now go say 'bye' to them."<p>

She stood as the boy ran back to his parents for hugs. "You either, little lady," the Edenian added, lightly pinching the cheek of Hua Tung Mei, one and a half years old and clinging to her mother's neck.

"You're going to have your hands full," laughed Sindel's husband's sister, letting her boy run into the tiny field of the courtyard.

Sindel rubbed her stomach proudly. "Training," she said. "You have both gone through this once. I feel as though I've been delaying something."

"I think you're the lucky one," replied Ming. "Trying to care for a child on top of everything else?" She shook her head. "It's exhausting. Of course, Nei Jen is not the most docile boy. And he was so big he almost killed me... It's all your fault," she concluded,

elbowing her husband in the stomach.

He oofed. "Oh sure. You had no part in it," he countered sarcastically.

"None at all."

Sindel smiled at their antics and turned to Kei Sa. "We'll be due at about the same time, won't we?"

"Yes, I think so." Kei Sa nodded.

"I hope you're back then."

"We should be. We will gather the colonists and bring them home."

Sindel's eyes darkened solemnly. "But nothing's ever so simple. I wish it were."

"As do I," agreed Kei Sa solemnly.

"Well," cut in Hua Quy Ling, leery of the silence. "We should be going."

"That we should," sighed Kei Sa, setting Tung on the ground.
"Goodbye, darling. Goodbye, Empress."

"Goodbye," Ming said, allowing her husband to lead her toward the ship. "Oh!" She stopped. "Keep them inside when it's hottest. And in the shade when the sun is harshest. And make sure he takes his naps!"

"Come on," Wei Yong insisted, pulling her away.

"Farewell," Sindel whispered.

She picked up Tung, then beckoned to Nei Jen. He came immediately with an obedience she feared would soon change.

"Let's get you settled in, okay?"

18. IV

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

IV.

* * *

><p>While it perhaps drained Rah Cai Yue and Kei Sa to create a portal, it took almost no time to pass through one's indigo gate and emerge from its swirling exit. It had taken less than a minute for the entire Mandalorian convoy to travel the billions of light years to the other nest of life in the universe, but that had been followed by weeks of wandering travel and ceaseless searching.<p>

What was time-consuming was finding a handful of tiny colonies in a

plethora of inhabited planets. They wouldn't have had a hope, if it weren't for Mr. Tse's detailed mapping of the star systems in which the five colonies had settled, and a path connecting them. Even with such help, finding them was proving to be a ludicrous chore.

And if it weren't for some bizarre coincidence or luck that set the humans of Earth's own English as a prominent language in the wretched galaxy they'd found themselves in, they would have been forced to abandon their efforts before they really began.

But Hua Quy Ling wasn't interested in contemplating the reasons for such a connection. Let Rah Cai Yue invest all his knowledge and zeal of history to determine the previous point of contact between the two regions and mull over what significance had pushed such a hypocritical, difficult, ugly language into prominence; Quy really didn't care.

In the mind-numbing weeks that had passed, they'd all experienced a bit of cabin fever, and they relished the opportunity to wander the varying planets and interrogate the Basic(as the galaxy's residents called it)-speaking natives for a clue to their next destination on which to focus a portal, even if it meant they had to refresh their English skills or completely learn the language. He thought it was a stupid language, all cobbled together from various others, but if it was his only ticket off the cramped Templar...well, he'd do anything it took.

His wife, growing ever more prominently pregnant with each passing dayâ€"if time could even be classified on the eternal bright of the ship's halls and in the perpetual blackness of spaceâ€"spoke English well, better than he, but she had not once left the ship. Kei Sa had immersed herself in studying the star charts and mapping everything they scanned, the living counter to Yen Sa's ever-upgraded computer-like devices.

Therefore, Hua Quy Ling was not the least surprised when he woke on a day mirroring any other to find Kei Sa had already left. He whistled a nameless tune, doubtless the melding of any number of songs he'd heard in his life, and subconsciously rubbed his left thumb on the end of his katana's hilt as he walked through a nameless hall.

He intended to spar with Rah Cai Yue, sick of the odd ways most of the members with unorthodox weapons fought. Unfortunately, although Cai Yue fought with an ordinary sword, he used a unique style and Quy Ling wasn't likely to encounter any normality in his next fight, either. But he hadn't had any other choice: Li Wei Yong was busy commanding the army, Yen Sa with his mapping projects in their desperate attempts to merely locate their colonies, and Hua Quy Ling refused to acknowledge that Vendetta existed unless the situation necessitated it.

Years had passed and times had changedâ€"Quy certainly hadâ€"and while the ex-ninja had never done a thing to hint at betrayal, Quy would never like the caustic man, probably not even accept him. And Vendetta likely didn't care, so what did it matter?

Rah Cai Yue sat on the floor of the emptiest large space on the Templar, awaiting Quy, but obviously too engrossed in a book that was, for once, not his Bible to care.

"Cai Yue," Quy Ling said firmly.

The priest looked up from his book with a jolt, then closed it with a resounding thump, leaving it to lie lonely on the floor when he stood in one fluid motion.

"Tell me," he said, "what time is it?"

Hua Quy Ling's mouth dropped into an almost imperceptible frown that went unnoticed by the other. "Time?" he asked.

"I thought since I had no clue, I should find someone who did to enlighten me."

"I don't think anyone on the Templar knows what time it is, not since Yen Sa pirated his clock and our watches for parts."

"Oh." Cai Yue tapped his foot. "What time of day would you say it was, then?"

Quy's forehead creased in perplexity. "Morning?"

"Oh," Cai Yue repeated, sounding surprised. "Did I miss breakfast?"

"No, not yet... Why?"

"Well, I thought it was night, and I'd missed dinner, and I thought you were really eccentric for wanting to spar at night. But now, if it's morning, I've missed dinner, I'm about to miss breakfast, I've been up all night, and I guess I'm the eccentric one."

"We already knew that," muttered Quy Ling. Then he said more clearly, "I don't suppose anything useful has come of your sleep deprivation and unwitting fasting?"

"Actually, my somewhat skeptical colleague," he said with the giddy cheer of the sleepless, "I believe I have figured it out."

"Oh, really," Quy commented, mildly surprised not only at Cai Yue's accomplishment but also to find he was mildly interested.

"Yes," said Cai Yue, sliding his sword from its sheath on his back. "Have you ever heard of the Sorceress Ennir?"

"No." Quy drew his katana and held it in front of his body with both hands. "Should I have?"

"Probably not. Basics are that she was Edenian and she was evil." He tossed his sword into his left hand and dropped into an extremely low stance, one leg extended, the foot kicked far out in front of him, his weight resting on the other where it was bent under his torso. His left arm held the sword straight above his extended leg; the blade continued the line made by his leg for a short distance. His other arm was splayed out behind him for balance. "It's a new stance I've been toying with," he explained. "Like it?"

Quy Ling sighed inaudibly. "Can't you fight normal?"

"'Fight normal'?" Cai Yue stood, abandoning his absurd stance. "You

mean fight boring?"

But he reverted to his typical, more orthodox stance, his sword held once again in his right hand and tilted back to rest on his left hand in the space above his left shoulder.

Quy darted forward with a simple horizontal slash that Cai Yue parried casually, continuing his explanation as he did so.

"She was in power just before the Transformation, and she was the reason for the lengthy war before the Transformation, excelling at manipulation as much as the one who was later awarded her powers by the Demon Master as Ennir's punishment for failure."

"And who would that be?" Quy asked with a forward stab.

"Shang Tsung," the priest answered simply, nimbly dodging a strike.

Quy dropped his guard. "Who would be worse to encounter?"

Cai Yue paused as well. "I don't know." He flicked his wrist, sending his sword into a rising slice. "And I don't care to find out." He slashed twice, then tossed his sword into his left hand. "So after the war when she was defeatedâ€"

"Wait," Quy said, with three rapid thrusts that sent Cai Yue hopping backward. "Don't I get to hear about the war?"

"Do you really want to hear about the war?"

Quy spun quickly, swinging his katana in a wide arc that was interrupted by clanging loudly against Cai Yue's blade, sending a vibration up his arm. "No."

"Then stop complaining. After she was defeated and Kahn stripped her of her powers, they had to decide what to do with her followers. See, a lot of weird things showed up to help her, which had never been seen before and haven't been seen since. Most were ordered to go back to wherever they came from."

"Which you think is this galaxy." Quy blocked a keenly aimed blow; it would have disabled his dominant arm and sailed through his trachea had it been serious and not blocked.

"Most likely," said Cai Yue. "But more difficult to deal with were the humans. Ennir had a large following of men who had been corrupted by evil and supernatural powers and could not be sent back to Earth. So they were sent with the others, back to whatever place they had emerged from to serve Ennir. And they spoke an early form of English, that they likely developed."

"Ah, interesting."

"Yes, but disturbingly," Cai Yue dropped his sword suddenly and was forced to duck an attack that had already been loosed, "a majority of them were clones. Ennir was a shameless cloner."

Hua Quy Ling was unsettled by the thought. "Do you think they could have spread cloning through this place?"

"If they had the influence to spread English..."

Quy shuddered. "Abominations of nature."

"It's an abomination," said an unmistakably accented voice from the doorway, "that you two are here when there's good news."

They both turned suddenly.

"Well, news anyway," amended Zhen Feng Qui. "Cai Yue, you're wanted on the bridge."

The 'bridge', if it could be called such on a ship the size of the Templar, was not far from the corner in which Quy Ling had picked to spar. Actually, nothing was far from anything on the Templar, a large part of the reason the weeks on it had become so unbearable.

Cai Yue bounded through the door, undoubtedly suffering from lack of sleep, decided Quy Ling.

"Ming," the priest said, addressing the queen with the informality only two other members of the honor guard had to history to share, "I have good news, too. I figured out the connection for the language."

"I'd be delighted to hear it, Cai Yue," she replied, a flat quality caused by weariness underlying her tone, "but you need to create a portal at the moment."

"Where are we going?" Cai Yue dropped into his seat.

"To visit our people."

* * *

><p>The planet was brown. And green. Most planets were. But most planets were blue, brown, and green. This one just had occasional splashes of a disgusting orange.

Zhen Feng Qui twisted his face into an expression of revulsion, "What celestial being retched up this place? I'd like to desecrate her temple."

"Looks fun," agreed his long-time friend, Ta Lian Shi, with a similar expression. "You know I think I might actually volunteer to stay on the Templar this time."

"If this is the right planet," the queen cut in sternly, "we're all going."

The two fell silent. Zhen resumed staring out the viewport. He'd seen some ugly planets in their lost wanderings, but this one beat them all. And it only got worse as the Templar Aria approached, skipping into a low orbit.

"Now," Yuen Ming continued, "to find our colony. We know it's in a swampy area."

"Oh," Lian said, turning his head toward Zhen so only his friend saw the slow rolling of his eyes. "That really narrows it down, doesn't it?"

"I think I saw some dry ground down there," Zhen responded as the Templar descended. "But then I realized it was just a rotting tree stump."

"And I'm sure there are no evil blood-sucking insects here, either."

Zhen absently adjusted his hat. "I don't think leeches are considered insects."

"I wasn't talking about leeches."

"Maybe not, but leeches are the worst."

"No, the worst were the kamikaze flying amphibians we 'found' a week ago. I still have some bruises and this cut on my handâ€""

"Will you two be quiet!" The queen snapped, turning viciously in her chair.

"Now is not the time for jest," scolded Vendetta in an acidic tone.

But now was always the time for jest in Zhen's opinion. If not now, when?

Nai Do Xian, skillfully guiding the ship through unpredictable air currents, spoke into the silence that followed. "We're approaching the approximate coordinates of the colony. Hopefully we'll be able to see it through the foliage."

Staring at the drab green of the twisted treetops outside the ship, Zhen glimpsed a cloud of darker gray than the others, and fed by a stream rising off the ground.

The queen leaned forward, her lips opened slightly in shock. "Is that smoke?"

"Yes," said Hua Quy Ling. "And it's not from any normal forest fire."

Lian spoke again. "Do they have forest fires in a swamp?"

The queen whipped around in her chair to tongue-lash him, but a flash and an unmistakable shake of the ship turned her back to the viewport and the pilot. "And that was..." She trailed off, her voice high with disbelief.

"An explosion," finished Quy Ling in a phlegmatic tone uncharacteristic of fire elements: more fodder for the belief that his was the marriage of two entirely separate basic elements, one undoubtedly fire, and in the opinion of most, the other air.

"Lieutenant Nai," Yuen Ming urged, "faster!"

The Templar Aria was already rocketing through the planet's atmosphere, skimming the surface of the trees. In contrast to the queen's distress, it slowed, descending to a jerky landing in a clearing near the origin of the smoke, one in which the water appeared to be shallow.

"Draw your weapons," the queen ordered. "We have no idea what we might find."

"We never do, Ming," argued Rah Cai Yue in a light, almost unthinking tone.

"This time," amended Kei Sa, "expect hostility."

Only a few paces separated the cockpit from the ramp; Zhen covered them quickly with his long legs. The ramp was stopped at a horizontal position, a finger-width from the water. At the sight of the swamp's scummy surface, Zhen hesitated.

He made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. "Leeches," he muttered.

Li Wei Yong waved his sword. "In we go," he ordered. Holding his sword above his head, he jumped off the ramp. The water sloshed away from his landing spot, sweeping away the surface scum to leave him an aura of cleaner filthy green water.

"Only knee deep," he said, lowering his sword. "Let's go."

Zhen hopped in with a silent sigh, following the general as he waded toward the column of smoke shrouding the sky.

"Oh, the lovely feel of slime in my boots in the morning," grumbled Lian.

"It's not morning anymore, you dimwit," replied Zhen, trudging with less effort than his shorter friend beside him.

"It is here," retorted Lian, pointing to the sun where it hovered just above the horizon, its edges barely visible through the creeping foliage.

"How do you know it's not dusk?"

"Because I was paying attention as we landed and we're heading almost straight toward this planet's north pole, which would make that east," Lian concluded with the hint of a smug smile under his scowl.

Yen Sa, from near the back of the group, called up in reply. "And how do you know that we're not heading toward the south pole and how do you know this planet doesn't rotate on its axis the other way?"

Lian grunted. "I hate this space travel thing."

Zhen silently agreed. For him it had been intriguing to visit strange planets in the beginning, but it soon became tedious. Lian, however, had lacked any interest in their exploration since the moment he found he was not going to be allowed to actually explore the planets themselves and do crazy things that had a high chance of getting him

killed. And, though he would have never admitted it, Zhen knew Lian missed his fiancée and watching Hseh An traipse along beside Tieh Chen Yi hadn't helped matters. In their naivete, they'd all thought they'd be home weeks earlier, and everyone was dwelling on the cranky side of their personality.

"It's morning," Nai Do Xian acknowledged. "This area was rotating further into the day side as we landed."

"Ha," Lian said simply, to anyone who happened to be listening, which added up to no one.

"Has it ever occurred to you," Tieh Chen Yi suddenly snapped, "that your useless arguing is ruining our chance of ambushing anything up ahead?"

"And this huge scumless wake we're leaving isn't?" Lian raised his weapons far over his head in an irritated gesture.

Tieh Chen Yi glared at him. Zhen stifled a laugh as the yokel, so intent on resisting the impulse to strangle Lian with his whip, stumbled when his boot met an incline in the sucking mud and tripped up it and onto the relatively dry dirt before he realized it was ahead of him.

Flames licked at the soggy foliage around a pile of metal wreckage, sending up a trail of oily, black smoke. People scurried about, desperate to smother the flames, and others lay on the ground with various burns and lacerations, but all seemed to be Mandalorian, and none seemed to be fighting.

As Zhen stepped into the area, his drawn sword dangling uselessly from his hand, an injured man lying in the dirt near the edge of the clearing raised a blackened arm and tried to sit up, grunting. The woman tending him pushed him back down. She looked up, her worn skin crinkling in the corner of her eyes. "Reinforcements," she whispered, standing to leave her patient in order to hurry toward the newcomers.

She rubbed her palms on her blood- and dirt-caked dress and inclined her head toward the foremost of the honor guard. "I am Sun Leh," she said.

"I am Li Wei Yong, commander of the army," he replied. "And this is the rest of the Queen's Honor Guard."

Sun Leh hastily dipped into a deep bow toward the general alone. His introductions ignored the queen, as they had decided at the beginning of their trip not to mention her place on her own guard among strangers, and this woman had either instantly joined the ruse or forgotten that her queen was a member of her own honor guard.

"Tell me," the general continued, "what happened?"

The woman straightened. "We were attacked, but that much should be obvious. We have been several times already, but this was the worst. Before they burned crops, dumb little pranks to try to get us to leave. This time... We never actually saw them. They fight like cowards," she snarled. "They flew above us in their invulnerable little ships, firing at our buildings, our ships, sometimes our

people."

"They strafed our colony?" Nai Do Xian seemed horrified.

Sun Leh grimaced in affirmation, anger simmering in light blue eyes.

Zhen shifted anxiously on his feet, watching a chain of people carry buckets to toss on the fire. They wouldn't get very far with a single bucket at a time against that blaze; even Zhen knew that. He wondered how Lian managed to keep himself from running over to correct them or simply summoning a gush to cease the burning.

"And what was the explosion a few minutes ago?" the queen asked.

The woman pointed at the smoldering wreckage behind her. "Our last working ship exploding. The drive was damaged by the attack, and a group of men tried to prevent its explosion, but they're all dead now. And Peng was a little too close," she added, indicating the man she'd been tending.

Finally the people waited, filling each bucket they possessed, and as they threw their stock onto the fire as one, Zhen thought he saw Lian's hand twitch, and wondered how much of the water had simply appeared above the flames.

"How can we help you?" asked Kei Sa.

"Put out the fireâ€"" A cheer interrupted her words and she glanced over her shoulder. "Never mind." She rested her hands on her hips. "Repair our homes, I guess."

Li Wei Yong shook his head. "We're taking you home."

"And you have enough room on your ship for all of us?"

"On those we left in orbit there probably is. But we have other colonies to visit, so we'll need to repair your ships. Some are repairable, right?"

"If you have the supplies, they should be." Sun Leh pursed her lips. "But first, you have food on your ships, no? The first attack destroyed most of our crops, and no one will trade with us."

"Lieutenant Nai," the general ordered, "go back to the Templar and call the other ships." The sniper nodded and started off. "Three of us will go to any nearby settlements and interrogate the locals for information on this terrorism. The rest of you will help repair the ships and tend to the colonists. I'm going."

Zhen began to consider which was the lesser of two evils, but the need was soon averted.

"I will go." Hua Quy Ling spoke quickly.

Rah Cai Yue spoke at the same time. "I'm coming."

"Cai Yue, you can't go," the queen said. "You need sleep."

"If I stay," he said, "I'll help, and then I'll end up falling off the hull I'm patching and break my collarbone and rupture my spleen. I'm going."

The queen sighed but said no more.

Lian shook his head slowly. "He gets this obstinacy from you, doesn't he?" he said to her. Ignoring the glower he was given in reply, he continued. "Lucky dolt, too. Why can't I ever be ordered to take a nap?"

"Lian," said Zhen. "I order you to take a nap."

"Nice try, dimwit, but technically I outrank you."

"Get to work," scolded Li Wei Yong. He turned to Hua Quy Ling and Rah Cai Yue. "Back to the Templar."

19. V

The Queen's Honor Guard

>by Nyohah<p>

V.

* * *

><p>The trio of Mandalorians walked into an open market. The village in which it was located was not much larger than the Mandalorian colony had been, and certainly no less muddy. But the market was extensive, and seeing the trails of visitors entering from all sides out the Templar's viewport had been the determining factor that chose the particular settlement of the many.

They received strange looks from the shoppers and vendors, being dressed in their simple black uniforms, Cai Yue in his coat, and each carrying a sword, the metal weapon long since antique in this galaxy's society. On other planets they had been whispered about, stared at, but tolerated with the same open attitude the people gave various alien species. But here they were avoided, scowled at.

Li Wei Yong sneezed for the fourth time since leaving the Templar. "At least we know they've encountered our colonists enough to hold a grudge."

"That won't help us much since it also means they recognize us as Mandalorians and won't speak to us." Hua Quy Ling's hand clenched his katana's hilt, but he otherwise calmly scanned the crowd.

"Maybe we should ask someone who is not human," Cai Yue said, turning over a medallion on the table in front of him. The woman behind the counter shrieked and slapped his hand away with a muddy stick as though he were poised to secrete acid from his fingertips and destroy her work.

Wei Yong thought it was a reasonable suggestion. They had only approached humans, and other species could possibly be not xenophobic enough to shun them, but there were other details to consider. "We know the humans speak Englishâ€"Basic." He corrected himself

hurriedly.

"We've already noticed how prominent the language is," said Cai Yue. "Especially among the humans. So surely some other aliens have made a point to learn the human's language. We have."

"We picked Basic because we already knew it." Wei Yong sneezed again. "But we'll give it a try." He scanned the crowd and spied a short, green, scaly thing with a hideous-looking horn jutting from its chin. He took a step toward it and tapped it shoulder, repulsed to find that it was both cold and hard. "Excuse me," he said in lightly accented Basic, his vowels extended.

The alien rumbled at him, its crackling voice forming incoherent growls, then ascending into a piercing squeal that caused Wei Yong to wince. It moved off, pushing through the crowd.

"I don't think that one was capable of speaking Basic, General," said Cai Yue softly, just behind him. "A more humanoid non-human this time. Like us." Cai Yue craned his head in an attempt to see over the passersby, but had to lean to look around the mainly taller-than-he bodies anyway.

He pointed to the customer of a vendor a few stalls down. "Here, General."

The 'alien' in question wore a dark gray flight suit, the bottoms of the legs caked with mud like everyone else's, and speckled to the knees. A towel-like cloth covered his neck, distinguishing him from the humans around him, but other than that, Wei Yong thought he looked as human as the others did. But he trusted Cai Yue's instincts and approached the customer, flanked by his fellow Mandalorians.

The customer held one of the vendor's finest items, an uncut, yellow gem, rubbing it with his thumb. He tossed it once then handed it to the vendor. "Yes, but can you polish it?" he said, his speech marred by flat vowels and preoccupied with consonants, harsh to the Mandalorian's ears. The vendor nodded and took it back to his laser to cut it.

"Excuse me," said Li Wei Yong.

The customer turned at once, then paused, cocking his head and giving Li Wei Yong the impression that although his light olive green eyes tracked others walking behind the Mandalorians, he was giving them the same analyzing glance Wei Yong was giving him.

He was taller than Wei Yong, but shorter than Zhen Feng Quiâ€"about Quy's height. His skin had the same pallor as Kei Sa's, but his seemed dull while hers shone. His hair was whiter than even his skin, short and untidy. He crossed one bare foot over the other to press it against the arch and grinned mirthlessly, casually baring his twin sets of thin, sharp incisors. "You would be...?"

"We're Mandalorians," Wei Yong hastily explained, leery of the alien's tone. "Our colony was destroyedâ€" "

"The smoke."

"Yes, just this morningâ€" "

"So you've come to accuse me."

"What?" Wei Yong's eyes widened in alarm and he raised his hands. "No, no. We got here just after the attack, and we need some information about it."

The alien leaned forward. "I just got here this morning, too. And I'm taking the first shuttle off this wasteland tomorrow." He uncrossed his leg, straightening into what seemed a more alert posture, but closing his eyes.

Wei Yong began a slight bow to politely withdraw, but a taunting snort from a customer at the next vendor halted him. The human standing there didn't hide the fact that he'd been eavesdropping and was staring. "One would think pond scum like you would feel right at home in a dump like this."

The alien's eyes snapped open a sliver, revealing a slit of slightly milky green. His tongue clicked in rapid succession. The human retained his sneer. The alien warningly clicked his tongue again, and the sneer faded, but the human didn't move. Then the alien smiled broadly at the human, a larger rendition of his earlier grin, and he ran his pale tongue across a pair of pointed incisors. An unsettled frown creased the human's face and the alien retained the grin until the human crept away.

The slit eyes followed the departing human then slid shut. "Humans," the pale alien growled. "They think they're special because they're the most prevalent, 'pure' version of the most common form. So they assume we're variations of them: they're humans, we're mere humanoids, obviously inferior." He stomped his foot, splashing the mud. "Maybe they're mutations of Calyaar. Or maybe we're all just variations of your race."

"I don't think they'd like that very much." Cai Yue's Basic was far less coherent than Wei Yong's, but the alien picked it up without apparent difficulty.

"Not at all," he agreed. "They're too self-righteous to believe they're a second-rate anything. And there's no way they'd allow it to be you. It'd be like the Mon Calamari acknowledging that the Quarren have equal right to their planet."

"Calamari? Squid?" Cai Yue began to giggle. Wei Yong felt like disowning him.

The alien crossed his arms. "I'm not here for your entertainment."

"Of course not," amended Li Wei Yong. "My friend is lacking sleep."

The alien cocked his head again.

"The humans?" Hua Quy Ling asked hesitantly, double-checking each syllable.

"What about them?"

Li Wei Yong grabbed the direction of questioning. "Do you think they destroyed our colony?"

"Humans?" The alien opened his eyes. "Nah. They're not fond of you, but it wasn't them. I'd say pirates. In fact, I think I encountered your very attackers."

"Hey." The interrupter was a human, clad in a hooded brown robe.

"What? Have I been picked today as the official target of pestering by idiots everywhere?"

The human was unfazed. "Are you Braeden Leer?"

The alien inhaled deeply. "No."

The human frowned. "But after the account of what happened on the shuttle this morning...they said it was a Calyaar..."

The alien clicked his tongue once. "I'm not the only Calyaar in the galaxy."

"Butâ€" "

"Are you Anakin Skywalker?"

The human blinked. "Of course not!"

"But you're human, aren't you? And you're wearing a robe..."

The young human frowned again, but he turned to leave. "Sorry to waste your time," he said.

"Who was that?" asked Wei Yong, as the young human disappeared into the crowd.

"Some Jedi." The alien waved his hand in dismissal.

Cai Yue missed the gesture. "He seemed good at frowning."

The alien's mouth curled into an actual amused smile, incisors safely concealed behind pale lips. "Most Jedi are."

"But about these pirates..." prompted Wei Yong.

"Siznik Pirates. Insectoid, vicious, and do just about anything for a few extra credits. They tried to board the shuttle I was on this morning, probably still riding the pheromone high they got when killing your colony. I'd say it was them, possibly paid by the humans on this planet, but the humans did not attack them."

"Do you think we'll be able to avenge our colony?"

"If you want to chase them all over the galaxy, be my guest." The alien shook his head, a water droplet flying off his hair.

The vendor tapped him on the shoulder. "Mr. Leer?"

The alien turned and grabbed the now-polished yellow stone and felt

it once more, then tossed a few credits onto the table.

Then he left without a farewell, leaving the Mandalorians to stand in the midst of hostile strangers, all alone in the mud.

* * *

><p>He whistled as he passed through the crowded hallway, the sound shrill and unpleasant to most of the humans, unbearable to a couple of lanky, furred aliens he passed, but commonplace to the rodent-like thief that crouched in the corner.</p>

It glimpsed the yellow stone the pale alien rubbed with his thumb and wiggled its pink snout in anticipation. Then it catalogued the robust carriage of the alien's shoulders, the lithe grace with which he slid down the hallway. It turned its sight to a chunky, less alert-looking human with a fat wad of credits protruding ever so slightly from his pockets.

Braeden Leer ignored the slight thief in the corner, sensing that it had set its sights on a less perilous target. He stopped near a door and pressed his tongue closer to the roof of his mouth, sending the pitch of the whistle beyond human hearing and the two furred aliens into near agony. Sifting through the sounds of the hallway to find the whistle as it bounced off the end of the hall and assuring that he was at the right door, he slid his identity chip through the pad next to it. It hissed and split open in two jerky motions. He stepped into his rented room and the doors closed behind him with an offensive clang.

At the end of the main room, he clicked on the holovid, and was met by an annoying whine that accompanied the news. He flicked it off, the motion accompanied by a soft click of his tongue. The insolent, human employee he'd called with the problem had refused to believe that if he couldn't hear it, it could still be there. And it had apparently not fixed itself in the past two hours.

He ran a finger down the spine of the grayish-brown, long-tailed creature that dwelled on its nutrient frame, as he walked toward the refresher. The room was insult upon indignity, as he had found most hotel rooms were, and the refresher was the worst part of all. The stand-up shower unit in the corner could barely keep the water off the rest of the room's floor, let alone hold any substantial quantity. The sink was shallow and small.

He filled the sink, then unhooked the wrapping on his neck and slapped it into the water. Running a hand along the side of his neck, he wiped excess mucus from the smooth, hard covering on one set of gills. The air in the market had not affected him any less adversely than it had the Mandalorian who had interrogated him. He had almost wished he could sneeze, for the moment ignoring his opinion of the act as a most vile contamination of the air. His gills had become irritated, and his secondary larynx burned. He shook his head slightly at the irony of calling his air-breathing respiratory system 'secondary' when in the two decades since he had left his home he had only infrequently used his gills and the rest of his primary respiratory system.

He rubbed the mucus from his hand on a worn, if clean, towel, and wiped his other set of gills. He was interrupted by a buzz that

indicated a visitor. Opening the door, he recognized the human outside and the arm that held the towel dropped so the towel's ends draped on the ground.

"You," Braeden groaned.

The young Jedi did not seem much happier. "Why didn't you tell me the truth about your identity, Braeden Leer?" He enunciated the name deliberately. "I heard the accounts of how easily you dispatched an entire shuttle full of the Siznik Pirates. Maybe you are not the only Calyaar, but last I checked not many of your species leave your planet, and I find it impossible to believe there is another with your skills."

"Truth is but one aspect of reality." Braeden was motionless.

The Jedi let out a quiet laugh. "Your famous last words. But the irony is that you sound almost like the Council when you say them."

Braeden clicked his tongue. "They obviously lack the serenity to see it as you do." He slung the towel over his shoulder and turned away. "Now go back to your master before you get in trouble."

"I am not a Padawan," said the Jedi, sounding irritated. He stepped into the room and gasped audibly; even a human could have heard it. "It's like being blind," he breathed.

Braeden stopped. "So you've met my ysalamir, have you? They make nice little bubbles in the Force, wouldn't you say?"

"It's like it just doesn't exist."

"A useful pet."

"Useful?" The Jedi's voice brimmed with disbelief.

"For training and the like. Develop our skills without the Force and we should be better with it."

"So you're saying we should blind ourselves in order to see."

Judging from the tint of scorn in the Jedi's voice, Braeden wondered if the comment was meant to injure. But Braeden just shrugged and stepped into the refresher.

"You are a radical," muttered the Jedi. Braeden was unsure whether he was familiar with Calyaar hearing capabilities, whether he had intended the comment to be heard.

He pulled the wrapping out the sink and slapped it around his neck, allowing the cool tendrils of water to slide down his skin. "Now that you've agreed with the Council's judgment, can you leave?"

"If I had wanted to accept the Council's viewpoints so easily," the Jedi returned, "I wouldn't have come to speak with you."

"Careful, boy," said Braeden, returning to the main room. "With an attitude like that you may become an individual, and we all know what

our blessed Council thinks of those."

"You think so poorly of them?"

"I think they developed too much philosophy based around a tool. A tool that requires discipline, yes, but any tool of great power requires discipline. And we don't see soldiers philosophizing about their blasters, do we? I think they've become too engrossed in a debate over the nature of something that should be respected as is, not analyzed.

"I think you would do well to reevaluate everything you've been taught. We're here to make our own opinions; it's why we're sentient, is it not?"

"But then, what do I know. I am, after all, just a radical."

The Jedi remained silent; he had apparently not expected his former comment to be heard.

"Now go," Braeden concluded, "before someone finds out where you've been and who you've been talking to and takes you down with me."

The Jedi stood, frozen with an obvious reluctance to leave.

"Go. Now. Before I throw you out physically."

Finally the Jedi moved, a frown fully developed on his face.

With a sigh that was far too human for his liking, Braeden Leer shut the door.

* * *

><p>When the Mandalorian convoy set off a few hours later, it was with low spirits, an urgency to arrive in time to save the next colony, and a sense of relief that they knew exactly how to get to it.</p>

For Li Wei Yong, the last bit eased his mood more than much else could have. In a few minutesâ€"they had been traveling for hoursâ€"they would reach the exact point designated on the map and be able to direct a portal to their next colony. Before him, Kei Sa studied the map of the colony on the table that separated them, her eyelashes concealing the mismatched color of her eyes. In a few moments she would speak again, probably with some brilliant idea that he would have never been able to conceive and that would almost ensure their victory should a battle occur...she was amazing. But he could never love her as Hua Quy Ling did.

No, the woman he loved huddled in her chair in front of the bridge, her defeated, entirely unroyal posture epitomizing the mood of the Templar's crew. Her hair had long since unraveled from its tidy braid into a tangled mess, falling immodestly without restraint to such a length that the tips rested on the chair. Reveling in the chance to skip royal dress certainly did not authorize such extreme lack of decorum, but he doubted Ming cared. Maybe she didn't look like the queen she was; Ming certainly didn't mourn that loss. Maybe at the moment she did not even resemble a proper lady; well, there were those who would argue she never had been.

He could tell she was exhausted, but she stubbornly refused to leave the bridge, even though they only approached a checkpoint, and nothing requiring her authority was expected to occur until they reached the colony, and certainly hadn't in the past few hours. They had managed to cajole Cai Yue into sleeping after all the colonists were loaded. The others had gone to bed willingly, whether understanding there was nothing for them to do, or pouncing upon the opportunity to slack, or, as he suspected, a combination of the two depending upon who was in consideration.

Kei Sa had stayed; he had stayed. They had too much shared responsibility to be allowed sleep. Nai Do Xian had stayed, dutifully flying the *Templar* to the designated point on the map. He'd heard among the chatter of his men that the lieutenant had once stayed awake for an entire week to keep watch simply because it needed to be done. While he knew it was an embellished legend, he did not doubt that it had been based upon some aspect of truth. Lieutenant Nai would allow himself to sleep when he needed to and not before.

And Ming sat on her chair, her knees drawn to her chest. He could only imagine her anguish. She had fought with all her being to become a competent leader, learning the cultures of others, studying politics, even teaching herself *how* to be a leader. To be thrown into a situation where, once more, she could do nothing that someone else couldn't do better only piled another layer of despair unto that caused by the dilemma of the colonies.

"General," Kei Sa said with a hint of worry escaping her voice. His attention snapped back to her. "Are you feeling well, General? I can do this myself, if you need some rest."

"No, no," he said, a bit hurriedly. "I'm fine."

She smiled a little, a false smile born of uncertainty. "I think we should try to enter the camp this way," she said, trailing her finger across the map. "It will take us to the area in which we have already decided the colonists would likely choose to seek refuge in case of an attack, so we can protect it before having to fight through an entire army."

"It's a plan founded on sound reasoning," he said, never having expected anything other. "Though any clearing suitable for landing the *Templar* is far from the intended path."

"Indeed," she agreed. "And expediency is the true factor in question. Which makes our situation seem hopeless. We haven't the time to waste to come in from the side, and we haven't the resources to waste to come through the bulk of any attacking force."

"And all of this is based on a hope that any attack will be from the ground when it's unlikely they'll bother with such ancient tactics when they can just pound it from the sky." He sighed, rubbing a hand across his forehead.

"It does seem unlikely," she said, rubbing her hand across the map to smooth it.

"But we plan anyway, because protecting these people is our duty." He rested his head on his hand, covering his eyes. His imagination

expanded the map, developing it into a three-dimensional fictional replica. Any number of occurrences or stray landmarks in reality could ruin their plan, or open up a dozen new opportunities. Butâ€" "It's sounds good, Kei Sa," he said, raising his head.

"Are we ready?"

"Yes. As soon as we reach our checkpoint." He turned. "Lieutenant, how long?"

"Two minutes," he replied.

And probably exactly that, not a second more or less, knowing the lieutenant. "Someone had better go wake up Rah Cai Yue, then."

"No need."

He turned, surprised to hear the voice. Apparently, Rah Cai Yue's sleep had cured his overactive larynx, and his silent entrance had been missed. Of course, Wei Yong had never been prone to hold the priest in high regard. He would have had to be more than blind to miss the affection between him and his wife. But they were moral people. He trusted them both. And ignored it. What else could he do?

"Well, then," he addressed Cai Yue. "Get ready to make your portal." He turned away. "Let's go wake everyone else up and get ready, in case we need to make use of our plan."

20. VI

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

VI.

* * *

><p>The planet that had housed the second Mandalorian colony sparkled in the midst of space's great darkness, with deep cerulean oceans quietly rolling against the shores of fertile green continents: a little too much like home. Rah Cai Yue would have thought the planet's proximity to perfection would make the colony a greater target for the haters of the Mandalorians. However, it had not been attacked, threatened, or apparently even noticed by any of the galaxy's other occupants. They had not managed to trade with anyone, but they had not tried. Perhaps their reclusive actions had prevented an attack, keeping them from annoying the planet's natives.<p>

"No, you don't understand," he heard Ming say to the colony's leader, a tall, thickly built and seemingly equally thickheaded farmer named Jau.

"I think I do," he argued back, slamming the front of his hoe into the ground. "We just finished planting and you want us to abandon all our hard work on some flighty paranoia."

Ming simmered; Cai Yue could see her hands clench tighter. But she managed to keep her voice calm, although the colonist's stubbornness

was wasting time when the honor guard tried to desperately clutch every second, relieved that this colony was safe, but fearful for the others. "If you stay here," she explained, "there's a good chance not only your crops will be destroyed, but also your homes and your families."

"I don't care if some stupid aliens thought that swamp land was valuable property and wanted them off, this is our land now and we're going to stay here and defend it if necessary."

"With what?" Ming asked, her voice soft and condescending.

"Now, don't mock me, little girl," he puffed up his already expansive chest, "I fought in the army before I came here."

Cai Yue imagined Ming hadn't heard anything after, 'little girl'. She was going to punch him; he could see it in her stance. He darted forward and grabbed the arm she intended to use, but only that one arm in an attempt to remain inconspicuous and with the hope he could convince her to restrain herself before she used her other hand. She whipped her head around to glare at him and he awaited her berating.

But as Sun Leh stepped forward and spoke, Ming turned her head back. "Excuse me, sir," Sun Leh said, "but I know how you feel, and I would have hated to abandon my colony. However, you will not be able to stop them. They attacked us from the sky. How will you stop that?"

Jau seemed almost worried. "They bombed you?"

"If you want to call it that, there are better words but that one will do." She sighed, heartbreak expressing itself in her eyes. "I suggest you get your people out of here."

Then his ego returned, and with it brought the former stubbornness. "I don't take orders from women," he huffed, obviously offended by the very idea.

Ming was quiet, and Cai Yue, knowing her silence was not of defeat, cringed slightly as she narrowed her eyes.

"You take them from this one," she spat, raising her chin. "Yuen Ming, Queen," she over-articulated the word, "of Mandalore orders you to pack up this colony and come with us."

He opened his mouth and closed it almost immediately, then repeated the stupid-looking action several more times. Cai Yue thought it looked as though he was chewing his cud in the manner of the livestock he raised, whose intelligence probably rivaled their owner's.

"The...q-queen?" Jau stammered, dropping his hoe. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't know. Forgive me, Your Righteousness."

"Correct your mistake immediately," Ming said, her tone chilly, "and I'll think about it."

He hurried off without another word to her, shouting incoherent orders to his fellow colonists. They ignored him, and a more natural

leader arose to organize the departure.

"Ming," Cai Yue said, still holding her elbow in his hand, "was that wise?"

"What?" she said, wrenching it from his grasp.

"I thought we had decided as a group to keep your status as queen a secret during this trip."

"All the people already know that their queen is a member of her own honor guard. If they plan to assassinate me, they have a fifty percent chance of getting it right, and that's ignoring the fact that most of them probably remember Kei Sa and would recognize her, narrowing their choices to one. It's only the non-Mandalorians we're going to keep it a secret from." She crossed her arms, rubbing the elbow he had held, perhaps a little too tightly.

"What if one of them tells an outsider?"

"Then they'll know hardly any more information than they already did. Really, Cai Yue, don't worry so much." She stepped away, heading toward the true leader that had arisen from the others.

Worry? It was hard not to in the situation. They had three more colonies to evacuate.

* * *

><p>They caught the next colony just hours after their first attack. It had been small, enough to burn some crops, but the ships were unscathed, and no one had died. The jittery colonists left without a single belligerent word. They headed to the fourth colony.</p>

It had settled in a valley, surrounded by cliffs on three sides. Not a wise tactical choice for the possibility of ground battles; it was much easier to get things down into the colony than for the colonists to get them back up at potential attackers standing on the cliffs' tops.

The Templar Aria set down on the plain on the final side of the colony. From their distance, the Honor Guard could see nothing wrong with the colony—well, nothing was smoking and there were no bright flashes of light, so that had to count for something, in Tieh Chen Yi's experience with this galaxy and its forms of warfare.

However, stepping past the colony's borders, he knew immediately something was wrong. It was quiet. Never a good sign. And he could see signs of earlier damage, shoddily repaired. But something else...

People. Where were the people? Colonies tended to have colonists.

"Great," he muttered. "They've already cleared this one out."

"What was that?" asked Zhen Feng Qui, stepping past him to kick over an empty barrel, one among the many.

"Where are the colonists?"

"I've kind of been wondering that, too." He knelt to peer into the barrel's depths, ensuring that he hadn't missed their importance. "Then," he said with a snap of his fingers, "I figured it out."

Chen Yi jerked his head. "You have? Where are they?" he asked, a little too quickly.

"They all turned themselves into barrels." He spread his arms to indicate the dozens that stood to their left.

"Zhen, you're not funny." Chen Yi stepped away, heading back to the rest of the honor guard, who systematically began to search all the houses.

"Well, why else would they have a whole hoard of empty, useless barrels?" Zhen said, half-attempting to justify his peculiar logic as he followed Chen Yi.

In the center of the colony, Hua Quy Ling shook his head as he exited one of its buildings, no more than a metal shack. "These buildings have been abandoned, and I think they've been this way for quite a while."

"Why do you say that?" asked the queen.

"The roof in that one leaks pretty badly," Rah Cai Yue answered, pointing to the building he'd searched. "There are pools of water on the floor."

"And," added Quy Ling, "well, just look." He grabbed the edge of the building's thin metal wall and shook. It easily swayed, parting from the joint to reveal tiny glimpses of the building's shabby interior.

"Hey, don't do that," said a strange voice from...above?

Tieh Chen Yi looked up and saw a thin Mandalorian walking across the neighboring building's roof, each step causing it to vibrate. With a swift stride, he leaped from the roof, landing just in front of the queen with a quick stumble.

"Hi," he said, as though jumping from roofs was an ordinary occurrence in his life. "What are you guys here for? You look kinda familiar. Have I met you before?"

"We're the Queen's Honor Guard," Li Wei Yong said slowly.

"Oh, right. I knew that. I'm Ken Lih Ne." He slammed his hand on the wall Hua Quy Ling had shaken, snapping it back into place.

"What happened here?" asked the general.

"We got attacked," said Ken Lih Ne, shutting the building's door. "I think they wanted to steal our food, or something. But we chased them out, so no problem. Got a few holes in our houses from their guns, but those were easily patched."

"You 'chased' them out? This was a ground attack?"

"Yeah. Is that odd?"

"The other two colonies that were attacked were attacked by starships, from the air."

"That would not have been good." He shrugged. "Well, most of us have had people tell us we're uncommonly lucky before, so I guess this is just another example."

"Then, are most of the people that lived here...dead?" asked the queen.

"Dead? Oh, no," he laughed. "None of us died. They're all up there." He pointed to the cliffs. "We've been up there since we were attacked. I just got sent to down to check if we left any barrels of food, or something important like that."

"So you've been up there since you were attacked," mused the general. "We thought these buildings looked neglected."

"Neglected?" Ken Lih Ne looked around. "It's always been like this."

Tieh Chen Yi took another glance at the buildings. These were obviously people with priorities other than keeping their homes intact.

"How long have you been up there?" asked the queen.

"Two days," he said. "But don't worry; we like it up there. Some great caves. Sure, some of them are shallow and are only good for sleeping in and stuff, but a lot are deep, nice and mildewy and perfect for exploration."

Beside Chen Yi, Zhen swept off his hat, running his fingers through his hair. "'Nice' and 'mildewy' do not belong in the same phrase."

"I'd actually have to agree with you, for once," Chen Yi whispered back.

"So if you're living up there, I guess you guys are pretty good at getting up those cliffs," said the queen.

"Of course. They were the first thing we tackled when we got here. In fact, they were the reason we chose to build here. And to find that they had great caves, too. Yeah, we're a bunch of lucky people, all right." He began to walk toward the barrels.

"What exactly are you doing up there?" asked the general.

The colonist's eyes seemed to glitter. "Planning. Setting up traps. Making sure if they come back we can take them out."

"At this site, you have the disadvantage of being at a low point. Hills are far more defensive sites."

"We know, we know. We have a few people here who were in your army, General Liâ€"that is who you are, right? They told us that. We're making sure that we can keep possession of the tops of the cliffs,

and hopefully trap them down below us if they go for our buildings."

"And what if they attack from the air?"

"Then they melt our houses? I don't know, and I don't really care. This is going to be so much fun."

"Fun? You're risking your lives."

"Risking our lives? We've all climbed cliffs, explored the depths of caves, dived to the ocean's floor, swam with sharks... We came on this colonization trip because we had run out of exciting things to do at home. General, it's not fun unless you're risking your life. This could very well be the ultimate adventure." The colonist seemed to be getting a substantial adrenaline rush from the mere thought.

"Exactly," answered Ta Lian Shi. "Nobody else ever understands."

Chen Yi groaned. "And I'd hoped you were the only you."

"Mr. Ken," said the queen. "We came here because you are in considerable danger, and we're gathering everyone to take back to Mandalore."

"What?" He shook his head. "And ruin our fun? No one will ever go for that." He began to look into the barrels.

Kei Sa spoke, her eyes closed, and clutching her hands together tensely. "We still have a colony left to save. You could take part in the battle there."

"No," he answered. "It's not just the battle. We're doing this ourselves. It's our adventure. We'll rescue ourselves and make a name for ourselves."

Before he could look back down, Kei Sa opened her eyes and snared him. "If you help these people, not only will be it be an adventure, but you will be heroes."

"Heroes? You really mean it?" He tapped his fingers on the barrel rim. "Heroes. I think they'll go for that. I'll go tell them now. You wanna come? There's some really tricky parts we could go through. I almost fell three times the first time I climbed them. Amazing."

"No," said everyone except Lian.

"Of course," he said, stepping forward so quickly it almost seemed like a leap.

* * *

><p>Li Wei Yong looked up from the map of the fifth and final colony. "Kei Sa," he said, feeling the strain of the muscles in his face caused by worry and knowing he needed to relax, "are we really going to let those people fight with us if we run into trouble?"<p>

She did not answer immediately, running her finger across the map. "We have to, don't we? It would be dishonest if we didn't."

"You know we'll just get them killed." The image of novices fighting, slaughtered, things he'd seen too many times before... He flipped over his hand, tapping a finger on the palm in an attempt to distract himself away from the thought. "A good bunch of them have been in the army before, but most of them left a few months after training. Only three have ever held an officer's rank, and they were not outstanding, else they would likely still be with us."

She glanced up. "Perhaps it was foolish of me, General, but it got them out quickly."

"And put more people in danger." Haste cost lives; delay cost lives; inexperience cost lives...

"I know," she said, lowering her head and her voice, "but I had a feeling..."

"A feeling?" The portent of the simple word wiped his gloomy thoughts away. He glanced to the other honor guard members as they rested, scattered about the bridge, and leaned forward, speaking quietly as well. "Like a premonition?"

She spoke quickly, her thoughts unusually scattered. "I just felt a colony was in danger, and it couldn't have been the ones we already evacuated, and I thought it could have been a warning about the one we were at being attacked again, but it seemed like it was happening at the moment, as we were speaking to him..." She shook her head.

"No, not a premonition. It was...occurring, at that time."

Li Wei Yong breathed deeply, trying to keep a calm temperament. "We're too late?"

Her head tilted to the side in a strange action: not a nod, not a shake. "We may still have a hope of liberating them, though we'll need every extra fighter."

"Oh, sure." He knew his voice had been rudely mocking, but he couldn't bear the thought. More people to fight only meant more people to die against an invulnerable enemy. "How do we have a chance against their ships?"

"There's always hope, General, always. And even if we seemingly have no chance, we cannot turn from our people."

"I know, I know." He turned his head away. "It just seems so impossible. I'm beginning to doubt we'll ever leave this place. They're too advanced for us. We're fighting a primitive war as they scoff..."

"Yen Sa's creating some pretty advanced stuff. He's been inspired..."

He narrowed his eyes, not wanting any reminders of Yen Sa's endless trifling. "Then tell him that when he creates something that works and that everyone can use and that is helpful, not some crazy prototype, that he can come talk to me. There's too much at stake to risk it on his whims."

"Please try not to be too hard on him." Kei Sa's voice remained soft.
"You really hurt him at the meeting."

"He should have picked a more appropriate time to debut your little project." It had been a tense meeting anyway. Useless gadgets were not worth wasting the time of the council and making the honor guard seem any more like the undisciplined fools numerous council members thought they were.

"It has great potential."

He had trouble believing her. "Maybe. If anyone else can use it and if there is ever a need to forsake our trusted steel." He'd grown up appreciating the weight and balance of a well-forged sword. Maybe he was being xenophobic, but the battlefield was no place for untested pet projects.

Kei Sa did not reply and he sighed inwardly and turned his attention to the rest of the bridge. The other fighters on the bridge seemed hopeful, more so than before visiting any of the other colonies.

"Should we tell them?"

"No," she replied quickly. "No need to worry them."

"Yeah, we're the only ones who need to be worried." He looked down at the map, marked with their plans for different scenarios. This situation was beyond anything he had faced in battle before. Supernatural occurrences he could deal with; his ability to handle science he was beginning to doubt. Maybe he really did need to listen to Yen Sa.

He stood, but before he left to get his sword he turned back to the honor guard's leader. "I really wish you could come with us, Kei Sa. I'd trade that entire colony's help for yours."

21. VII

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

VII.

* * *

><p>Tempest ran his thumb and forefinger down one of the thin blades at the ends of his nanchaku, feeling the chips caused by years of use. His weapon was light, not hindering his ability to move quickly, something that he did very well with the help of his element.<p>

He could feel the tension on the Templar Aria's bridge, radiating especially from the general, who sat, sword in hand, beside Kei Sa, the plans for the colony filling the gap between them. He didn't have powers in the manner of Kei Sa, but he could read the emotions of people easily, usually even if he had never met them. It was something he had been forced to teach himself as a ninja, but even if he hadn't had the skill, he would have known something was wrong. Despite their leaders' attempt to keep the problem from them and prevent useless worrying, every member of the honor guard knew they

were likely heading into a battle, and one that would be unlike anything they'd dealt with before.

They had passed through the portal minutes earlier, and the planet they rapidly approached was primarily covered with forest, although it had its oceans and deserts like most other planets. Lieutenant Nai piloted the ship into the atmosphere, headed for the colony, as he had before.

"Lieutenant," corrected the general, "don't go directly to the colony. Stay high and as far away as Yen Sa's sensors can reach. We need to make sure they don't already have...visitors."

Nai Do Xian nodded and adjusted his course as Yen Sa flipped some switches on his device.

"Okay," the former slave said, "we're almost in range." He watched the numbers click by. "Detecting pockets of metal on the ground other than those mapped by the colony."

"They're on the ground?" asked the general, obviously relieved. "All of them?"

"Nothing in the air except us, General," said Yen Sa.

"Then we may have a chance."

Tempest thought the general sounded almost surprised.

"Lieutenant," he continued, "land us so the colony is out of range of our sensors. Hopefully then we'll be out of theirs." He turned and began to tap his finger on the map. "We'll need to disable all of their ships to have any sort of chance in this battle. Yen Sa," he ordered, "come show me where they are."

The boy hurried to the table and began scribbling locations onto the map. "Most of them are all here..."

Tempest returned to absently rubbing the blade of his nanchaku. Disabling the ships would be a task best left to an army of tanks and massive amounts of firepower, but in lieu of that, stealth would be their only option. "Surely you don't intend to send us all in after the ships."

Kei Sa looked up. "No. Not everyone. I'd thought we should send just the honor guard."

He shook his head. "No. That's too many for a covert operation. Half of us, at the most."

"Half?" she said. "And which six would you suggest?"

"Vendetta and I, first of all, for we were ninjas, and well-trained in the art of invisibility. The lieutenant's sniper skills would be appreciated, and Zhen's affinity for poison could help with quick killing."

"Any other suggestions, Tempest?" asked the general.

He glanced at the blade. "Not for the moment."

"Well," Li Wei Yong responded, directing his words to the rest of the honor guard. "We have two positions open."

Rah Cai Yue shrugged. "I can manipulate things from afar. I imagine that would be of some help."

Tempest nodded. Perhaps it would also help to destroy the innards of the ships.

Ta Lian Shi raised his hand. "I'll come."

Li Wei Yong's brow creased as he thought for a moment.
"Why?"

"Because I want to." He spun his right-hand weapon. "Can anybody think of a better choice?"

"I could probably fry circuitry with a bolt of lightning," offered the general.

Tempest shook his head. "You need to stay here and get the army set up for their attack."

"Hey," Lian said. "Who says their circuitry will be waterproofed inside the covering?"

Tempest half-smiled, nodding his head. "I think this will do."

* * *

><p>A few hours later, the Templar Aria was nestled in a small clearing, the honor guard doing their best to make it seem small, inconspicuous, and not a shiny silver. The sun had entered the last stages of its set, the green glow caused by its final beams shining through the foliage rapidly dying.

Tempest tucked the wooden part of one half of his nanchaku under his arm to secure it as he held the other half with his right hand. Turning to the other five in his party, he said, "Let's go," and set actions to his words, immediately leaving. He estimated they had about five miles to hike through the forest before they were close enough to require stealth. At that point, their only hope was to be seen only by those whose deaths followed in less time than it took them to signal any others to their presence.

At times during their hike, he almost couldn't tell exactly where each of his party members was behind him, and it was a fair accomplishment considering they were moving at too fast a pace to be properly silent. He and Vendetta had taught them much about the art of invisibility, and they had apparently taught them well.

"Hey," one of them whispered from his right, a few feet behind. It was Rah Cai Yue.

He stopped, and the others in his party gathered behind him. "What is it?"

"Do you have some kind of plan you'd like to share before we get too much closer or are we just going to wing it?"

Tempest nodded. "Vendetta will search for the holding place of the colonists and determine if there will be any easy way to free them before the battle begins."

"By himself?" asked Lian.

"Yes. That mission is the more difficult one, requiring more stealth. If we have to kill everyone in the general vicinity of their ships, then we'll be the ones in danger. If they find out someone's observing the colonists, it's likely to get them killed. Vendetta is the veteran ninja; he will go."

Lian nodded in understanding. "And we find the ships and hurt them real bad."

"Yes. The lieutenant will find someplace to hide, scout, and help us from afar. The rest of will go in and then... 'wing it'."

Rah Cai Yue smiled, saluting Tempest with his sword and bowing in a theatrical manner.

The group set off and a few minutes later they slowed, taking care not to be seen or heard and searching for the best entry into the area. As they began to glimpse outlines of buildings in the thankfully sparse light of the colony, Vendetta nodded once and left the party, stalking through the trees to an area of the colony that was closer to the buildings than the fields.

The others crawled around the perimeter of the colony until they saw the flash of light against metal. Upon study they found that a medium-sized ship, easily three times the size of the *Templar Aria*, had been landed on the former fields of the colony, six smaller, single- or double-person fighters flanking it.

Tempest nodded to Nai Do Xian, and the sniper nodded in return, pulling a small knife from his boot and scouting the area. He pointed to a tree overlooking both the ships and a good deal of the rest of the colony. Tempest nodded and the sniper began to climb, holding the knife's hilt between the lower half of his thumb and the side of his hand.

Tempest lost sight of him in the tree's leaves, then heard a slight gurgle. The sniper began to climb down again, dragging a human body with him. The others rushed forward to help ease the body to the ground so it wouldn't make a sound. Nai Do Xian was smeared with blood and the dead guard had a slice through his neck. Someone else had thought the tree was a good vantage point.

Lian examined the dead guard and pulled his weapon out of the holster. Tempest took it. It was some sort of projectile weapon, consisting of an elongated cylinder and a handle with a trigger, somewhat bulky. He set it by the base of the tree and pointed to it. Nai Do Xian nodded, cleaning his knife on the grass, then climbed the tree once more. He would retrieve the weapon when they left, so that Yen Sa could examine it.

Tempest turned to the remaining three in the party and beckoned. They crept toward the ships, getting as close to them as they could without entering the actual colony. Several invaders wandered around

the ships; most seemed to be socializing, but all were armed with variations of the type of weapon the deceased guard had been carrying.

He nodded to Zhen and pointed to the guards, then held up a hand, indicating for Zhen to wait until Tempest gave the order to kill. Then he turned to Cai Yue and held out cupped hands, mouthing, Catch him. The priest nodded in return.

A minute or so later, one of the invaders wandered closer to the honor guard than he was to any of his allies. Tempest pointed to the isolated human and nodded to Zhen. The invader convulsed once and was caught by an out-of-place shadow, then dragged outside of the colony's perimeter. Tempest saw the bloody foam running from the lifeless man's mouth and decided that Zhen's unusual power did indeed have its occasional uses.

Another of the humans seemed to notice his ally's disappearance. He began to walk toward the honor guard, but he was disposed of just as effortlessly.

Tempest shook his head. Despite the ease with which they could kill the humans, they couldn't kill them all, or even clear the area around the ships without alerting too many people. He turned to Lian and pointed to the ships. Lian nodded and looked at them, then turned back.

Where? he mouthed.

Tempest looked at the ship, then shook his head slightly. Cai Yue and Zhen shrugged.

Lian shrugged as well. He closed his eyes and raised his hands. He pointed to each of the smaller ships in turn, his hands twitching each time, and a little hiss of steam leaking from the rear ends of the ships.

One of the humans noticed the steam and approached a ship. He opened its cockpit and yelled, "It's all wet!" Another walked to the ship. The first climbed down from the cockpit and wrenched open a panel on the rear half with some sort of tool he had grabbed from the cockpit. A flood of water poured from the opening and the two humans cursed loudly.

Rah Cai Yue turned to Lian, grinning and applauding silently. Lian shrugged again, then mimicked the priest's earlier bow in smaller proportions.

Tempest pointed to the large ship. Lian shook his head vigorously.

"There's no way I can fill that thing!" he whispered.

Tempest raised a finger, insisting on silence.

Cai Yue tapped him on the shoulder, then nodded. He closed his eyes, concentrating. A minute later, nothing had happened, and Cai Yue gritted his teeth.

Tempest began to doubt the priest and was about to stop him when the

ship creaked. He turned his attention to it and saw the back end twist in another notch. The crushing increased slowly until the entire back end of the ship was nothing but a bulk of gnarled metal.

Rah Cai Yue finally opened his eyes, wiping sweat from his forehead. Tempest looked at him with respect in his eyes, and Cai Yue shrugged nonchalantly, although the smug smile on his face revealed his sense of accomplishment. After Tempest jerked his head in the direction of Nai Do Xian, the honor guard crept away, leaving the invaders to yell questions about the cause of their ship's bizarre destruction.

When the four honor guard members neared the tree in which Lieutenant Nai was hidden, he dropped from it, landing on his feet and retrieving the dead guard's weapon. He shook his head, whispering, "No more."

They left as silently as they had come.

22. VIII

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

VIII.

* * *

><p>"General."<p>

He turned quickly, pushing his anxiety about the upcoming battle from his thoughts and facing Kei Sa. The news Vendetta had brought of the colonists' location had not eased his dread. They were all together, luckily, but heavily guarded. The route Vendetta had taken to find a way into the buildingâ€"he had stopped before the final stepâ€"was one that most people wouldn't have the nerve to take. The news that all the invaders were armed, and with a weapon they could likely not counter, complicated matters further. He didn't know what to do, and he feared for the rest of the party that had yet to return.

Kei Sa spoke again. "What about the colonists? We promised them they could help."

He sighed, imagining the imminent slaughter, and shook his head. "I can't allow that. If we die here, we were doing our duty. I don't think they know what they're getting into."

"They volunteered. They'll feel betrayed."

"Bring them here," he replied. "I'll explain it personally."

She frowned slightly. "Is there something wrong, General?"

"Quite frankly, Kei Sa, I don't think we can win this."

"Then perhaps you need their help. They did manage to drive back their own attack."

Their help? No, he couldn't allow them to help in the way they

wanted; he couldn't allow them to be killed. But perhaps they had something else to offer: information. In his haste to reach the last colony, he had neglected to question any of them on the manner of the attack or their strategies in deflecting it. Haste could indeed easily cause fatal errors.

"Bring them here, Kei Sa," he repeated. "And I shall see what information they can offer us that could aid us in our fight."

She nodded slightly, not entirely satisfied. But she wouldn't get anything more from him, and she knew it.

He turned away from the others again, brooding. He knew he was being avoided and he really didn't care. Failure could not be tolerated. The lives of the colonists depended on the success of the mission, as did his reputation. He'd inherited his title more than earned it, the only option available to a revamped government. During his time of command, the army had defeated the Chiss rebels, but beyond their aptitude for killing they did not have much strategy to their actions, and were easily tricked into defeat. They'd also driven back Shao Kahn's invasion of Kloesh, but that victory could only fairly be attributed to the sacrifice of a Vyrenchi. This was a crucial battle, but an impossible victory. It was unfair that any should judge him based on the outcome of it, but he knew they did, and he was loathe to admit that he found himself thinking of a tarnished reputation with increasing frequency.

"Hey, General," said the voice of Ta Lian Shi behind him. "Mission accomplished."

He watched them enter the area, all five of them completely unscathed. Part of him was relieved, but the part that had already buried itself in fear quavered in anticipation of their "likely grave" report.

Tempest nodded in respect to Wei Yong's rank, then began to explain more thoroughly. "We succeeded in disabling all seven of the invaders' ships—six small fighters, and one freighter much larger than the Templar Aria."

"Terrifying the invaders in the process, I might add," said Zhen.

Tempest nodded. "A possibly unfortunate effect of the unusual methods we had to use to disable the ships left the invaders in an uncomfortable manner. I'm afraid they're more on guard now than they were before. And they're all armed with one of these." Tempest pointed to the weapon Lieutenant Nai held.

Wei Yong breathed deeply. The last thing they needed was for the invaders to get jittery enough to begin executing prisoners.

"Yeah, but like Zhen said," added Lian, "they're more frightened than anything else. After all, it's not every day that the back end of your main ship gets crumpled."

"It imploded," Rah Cai Yue corrected.

"Let's just hope we haven't endangered the colonists," said Wei Yong.

"I think more of them are by the ships now than the colonists," said Lieutenant Nai. "And the colonists were being held on the other side of the colony from their ships."

"Maybe so," Wei Yong said, "but it will be extremely difficult to get to the colonists without alerting the invaders. Unless you think we can kill all of them before they can kill any of our colonists."

"Whoa, wait," said Lian, the beginning of a smile creasing his face. "What do you mean, 'extremely difficult'."

"Vendetta climbed through the trees, jumping from branch to branch at times, hanging upside down from one to pick a lock without touching the roof to set off an alarm, then crawling through a ventilation shaft before seeing that he would have to hang from the rafters on the ceiling while attacking to avoid detection and then drop the fifteen feet to the ground where the colonists were at."

The smile on Lian's face broadened with every word. "Sounds like fun."

"And we did bring along seventy people who share Lian's definition of fun and who we promised to let help us," said Zhen.

"We can't send seventy untrained adventurers in to rescue a few hundred colonists," said Wei Yong, feeling a strain forming on his control of his temper.

"Of course not," said Lieutenant Nai. "There aren't even seventy invaders."

"What about just a few?" suggested Rah Cai Yue. "If we attack head on, we can distract most of the invaders."

"I'll think about it," Wei Yong replied, his harsh tone indicating that he wouldn't. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go speak to those very adventurers."

Rather than let him go speak to the recently arrived colonists by himself, those to which he had been talking followed him, and the rest of the honor guard joined him at the ship. As he approached the people roving about the entrance of the ship, Ken Lih Ne raised a hand in greeting and stepped forward.

"Hey, General," he said.

Wei Yong nodded at him. "As you know," he said, "we are here to liberate this colony, and to do so, we will most likely have to fight."

"Yeah," said Ken Lih Ne. "We're all ready and willing. What do you want us to do?"

Wei Yong willfully ignored the question. "I need to know the details of your fight."

"Oh, that? What about it?"

"How many attacked you?"

"About thirty."

"And they were armed with this?" Wei Yong pointed to the weapon Nai Do Xian held.

"Yeah, stuff a lot like that."

"Can you tell us what this weapon does?"

"It shoots out a red beam, with a loud noise, and the beam's really hot. Some of us have some nasty burns from them."

"Beams of light?" interrupted Yen Sa.

"Think so," answered Ken Lih Ne.

"General," Yen Sa said, "may I have that weapon? It would really help with one of my projects."

Wei Yong nodded. For once, he decided he would support Yen Sa's attempts at a new gadget, if something that could counter these advanced weapons was going to be the result. "How did you manage to defeat them without a single casualty if they were all armed with those?" he asked Ken Lih Ne.

"They didn't all have one. Only about ten of them."

"Only ten of your thirty attackers were armed?"

"The others were trying to take away our food."

"So how did you defeat the ten who were armed?"

"We have a few people who are really good with their element. Six of them were even in your tournament for the honor guard, and two of those even made it to the element testing. They just knocked the weapons out of their hands, or destroyed them. They got some shots off, but most of them missed."

Wei Yong was silent for a long moment. There was no way he could let all the colonists help, but some, these six, perhaps... "There's still no way to keep the captured colonists safe," he mused, quietly, but aloud.

"Excuse me, General," said Yen Sa, "but I think you've forgotten something."

Wei Yong closed his eyes and took a deep breath. If it had anything to do with his life-force swords... "What, Yen Sa?"

"These weapons fire light. Nothing but light. And I have complete control over any form of light."

"You're going to manipulate every beam of light they fire from every weapon by yourself." He crossed his arms skeptically.

"I can try, General," Yen Sa replied, refusing to be discouraged. "If the honor guard stands in a line, I should easily be able to create a

field across the front and I could stop every bolt that contacts it."

"What about the colonists?"

Yen Sa looked down. "That'd be an awfully big field," he admitted.

=We think you're all forgetting something,= said the voice of Honor.
=Light is nothing but energy. Vyrenchi can manipulate any form of energy.=

Wei Yong shook his head, but the gesture was reflective of his disbelief of his foolishness, not a dismissal. Of course, the Vyrenchi could help. They were an asset he'd never been taught to use, and their almost undetectable presence caused him to forget about them far too often. "Honor," he said, "do you think you and the other twelve Vyrenchi could protect all the colonists if we trust Yen Sa to protect the honor guard?"

=If you distract most of attackers, we shouldn't have problem.=

For the first time that day, a smile began to twist Li Wei Yong's lips. "Ken Lih Ne," he said, his voice assertive, "find those six who participated in the tournament. We have a job for them."

"Oh, they're gonna love this," Lian said.

* * *

><p>They did not worry about silence. After all, the six of whom stealth was required had already left, and were possibly already in place, awaiting the distraction to pull the invaders away from the captured colonists. Silent distractions were not the most effective.</p>

Neither did they announce their presence with extra noise or chatter. They walked through the forest as one might on a leisurely hike, albeit at a faster pace and with far grimmer expressions. Their weapons were either sheathed or strapped to their backs, accessible if invaders got too close, but out of the way. They would do no good against searing beams of light.

All their hope of survival rested on Yen Sa, and Li Wei Yong flicked another glance in the younger fighter's direction as they passed a small clearing and the planet's twin moons lit everyone's features. He seemed tense, unconsciously rubbing his sword's sheath, but otherwise in control.

He heard the invaders before he was able to discern any through the foliage. They were indeed agitated by the fates of their ships, to them bizarre and unexplainable. Above all the commotion, Wei Yong could distinguish the voice of what had to be their leader, yelling at his underlings for allowing the damage to occur. Curses peppered his angry questioning, both recognizable to Wei Yong and unfamiliar words he surmised were common to one of the planets in the vast galaxy. From what he could hear, the ruckus caused by the other invaders obscuring some words, the leader couldn't believe that the ships could have been damaged without the perpetrators being seen. Therefore, the guards must not have been doing their jobs. The deaths

of two of them only compounded the offense.

As they neared the camp one phrase rang clearly through the area.
"Don't tell me we have Jedi here!"

Wei Yong catalogued the word for further investigation. It was the second time he'd heard it used, and he noted the fear that accompanied it. Who were these Jedi, that the alien he'd questioned expected the boy's behavior to be explained with that one word, and whom the invaders seemed to fear as the only force that could have done the damage to their ships?

They stopped in the shadows just outside the colony's perimeter, after which the trees and brush ended, and white, artificial light began.

"Ready, Yen Sa?" Wei Yong whispered.

"Yes, General," the former slave replied.

As one, the twelve participating members of the Queen's Honor Guard took three steps forward, Wei Yong watching Yen Sa as they did so. He took one deep breath and closed his eyes, clenching his fists.

It was too late to back out; Wei Yong would have to trust the boy's powers.

"Hey, how'd you escape?" demanded a man whose voice matched the one Wei Yong had identified as the leader, aiming his larger version of the captured weapon at them.

"Uh, Carn," said the invader standing closest to the leader, "I don't think those are escapees. They all have some...weird...weapon-things."

"Then where'd they come from?" yelled the leader. By the time he'd finished speaking, every human in the clearing—close to fifty—had their weapon aimed at the honor guard.

Then an invader burst from the building in which the colonists were being held, shooting wildly through the doorway. He ran to the leader. "Carn," he gasped, "some people came across the ceiling. We tried to shoot them but our bolts were disappearing and then reappearing and coming back at us!"

"What," said Yen Sa, his eyes still closed and his words startling both the invaders and the Mandalorians, "like this?" A beam of crimson light shot from his hands, passing over the heads of the invaders. There were murmurs and shouts, and it seemed to Li Wei Yong that many of them wanted to flee.

"Kill them," Carn ordered, then fired the first shot.

It hurtled toward them, searing the air, a death wish to one of the honor guard. Wei Yong's breath froze for a split-second as he doubted Yen Sa's ability and tried to scramble for a plan. But the bolt disappeared, a mere foot from them, as did the torrent that followed.

Breathing deeply in relief, Wei Yong raised his hands and began to

summon energy above an invader. In a few seconds he released it and an agent bolt of lightning slammed into an invader. Wei Yong watched as the man convulsed violently and fell to the ground smoking, dead. Some of the energy jumped into those standing near his target, shocking them slightly, and Wei Yong frowned. The bolt had been too strong for him to properly control, although there had been no negative consequences in the situation.

Nearly twenty had fallen to the honor guard's various elements by the end of Wei Yong's first attack, but a glance to his side revealed that Yen Sa was trembling. He would be unable to stop the bolts in a matter of moments. They would have to end the fight quickly.

As Wei Yong raised his hands to prepare an even larger bolt, Carn threw down his weapon. "We surrender," he managed, his voice strained with terror. "Who are you people?"

One last man fell gurgling, prey to Zhen Feng Qui's poison. The other invaders threw down their weapons.

Wei Yong glanced at Yen Sa. He was wobbling. If the invaders figured out that Yen Sa was the reason the bolts hadn't reached them and that his shield was down while still in reach of their weapons... "Kick your weapons over here," he commanded hastily.

The invaders complied, and the freed colonists gushed from the building. Mothers took their children and huddled as far from the invaders as they could without leaving the colony grounds. Some gathered up the weapons. Others surrounded the surrendered invaders.

Yen Sa collapsed.

Wei Yong approached Carn. "What are we going to do with you?" he asked. "We can't just kill you, much as we would like to."

"Well, we thank you for your infinite mercies," spat Carn. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he produced a weapon that resembled a knife and held it millimeters from Wei Yong's chest. The blade hummed softly as it vibrated. "Where's your shield boy now?" he asked with a malicious grin.

Wei Yong raised an eyebrow, slightly surprised that the man had deduced their means of defense. Then he grabbed the man's knife hand with his left hand, snapping the wrist. The blade thumped to the ground, but even before it hit, Wei Yong pressed the tip of his sword against Carn's throat.

"They may be primitive, weird weapon-things," he said, "but I assure you they do their job."

Carn swallowed.

"And what do we do with them?" asked Ming, stepping just behind him.

Wei Yong smiled. "Into the building," he ordered. "Since you seem to want this place so much, you can stay here."

The invaders were herded into the building. Wei Yong backed Carn into

it, watching the anger flash in the man's eyes. He slammed the door in his face.

"Somebody come lock this thing," he ordered, sheathing his sword. Looking around, he recognized one of the men sent to free the colonists. He nodded to the man and said, "Did you do any irreparable damage to the building?"

"No," he replied. "If we shut the vent we came through, they shouldn't even be able to get out."

"Do that," Wei Yong said. "Nice timing, by the way. Although you were supposed to wait for the distraction to begin before you entered, rather than starting the distraction."

The man shrugged. "There were only five of them. And the Vyrenchi said you were almost inside. We were tired of waiting. We wanted to get to the fun part."

"You did your job well," Wei Yong acknowledged.

"Actually we didn't do much. Those Vyrenchi are sure handy."

"That they are." Wei Yong nodded again as he left.

The colonists were already beginning to gather up their things, understandably eager to leave. With a smile, he finally allowed himself to realize that these were the last colonists, the last place to find, the last fear of invasion.

However, they did have one last destination: home.

And somehow he doubted it would be short or simple journey.

23. Part 4: Provocation, I

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

Part 4:
>Provocation
>Twenty-Three Years Before MK1<p>

I.

* * *

><p>"Try not to pass out, okay?" Zhen Feng Qui crossed one foot over the other and leaned against the side of the doorway that led into the ship's bridge.<p>

Yen Sa turned his head, not quite facing Zhen. "Did you say something?"

"I'm worried you're going to hyperventilate. You seem a little too excited."

"How could I be too excited?" He turned his head back and resumed staring. "Isn't it the most marvelous thing you've ever seen?"

It certainly was impressive, but hardly enough to make Zhen giddy. The stars twinkled with their various colors and levels of luminosity, scattered at their various densities. The planets were duller, visible as pinpricks of shadow ordered around the stars rather than shining strongly as they would have had he been viewing reality. The entire thing spiraled slowly, a detailed, three-dimensional display.

"It's very pretty," Zhen said flatly, stepping beside Yen Sa. "Can we go now? We've been looting through this ship for hours."

"Just as soon as we figure out how to take this with us." He leaned around the box that was projecting the image. "I don't think it's attached to anything..."

"Why?"

"Why? Why!" Yen Sa straightened. "Do you have no idea what this is?"

"Another flashy toy?"

"Toy!" He gestured wildly with his arms; Zhen thought he looked like an enraged flightless bird. "This is a detailed map of the entire galaxy!"

"This is not an entire galaxy. It's missing a piece." Zhen pointed to a large gap at the outside of the spiral.

"They probably haven't explored that part yet."

"Then it's not a map of the entire galaxy, is it?"

Yen Sa was pushing buttons. "Look, look," he said quickly, as the display zoomed in on a heavily forested planet. "Here we are."

Zhen stared more at the younger man than the planet. Was he really that much better at purposely ignoring Zhen than the others or was he really that easily distracted by electronics? "That's great, Yen Sa," he said as the planet rotated on a slightly tilted axis. "Now can you turn it off and get it out of here?"

Their search of the pirates' ruined freighter had given the Mandalorians several more weapons, clothing, some bizarre food supplies, loads of information on cards, a sort of hand-held computer to read the cards, some of the yellow-green syrup that had been in abundance in the sick bay, and now this map, the solution to one of their major problems.

But Yen Sa was neither turning it off nor looking for the way, staring with his hands dropped idly by his sides. "Do you think we might be from that blank spot?"

"I thought we were from another galaxy, Yen Sa."

"Maybe we aren't," he said. "Maybe there are no other galaxies."

Zhen crossed his ankles again. "But hasn't Shao Kahn already

conquered several of them?"

Yen Sa exhaled deeply. "That's what they say, isn't it?"

"'They say'? Are you saying he hasn't?"

He shrugged. "Maybe." He pushed a button and the galactic map vanished.

Zhen shook his head. "I think it's just wishful thinking on your part."

"It would make him a far less formidable opponent, wouldn't you say?" Yen Sa lifted the box and tucked it under one arm. "Pretty light," he commented.

"Okay," said Zhen as they left the bridge. "Let's say I agree with you: Shao Kahn has never conquered distant galaxies. So where did he get all his power and his armies?"

"I don't know," Yen Sa said with a slight shrug. "Elsewhere."

"Yen Sa," sighed Zhen, slapping the button to open a door a little too hard in his frustration, "I thought you were supposed to be a scientist, not a philosopher. All logical and stuff. You're not thinking logically."

"You're one to talk," snorted Yen Sa. "'They all turned themselves in barrels'?"

"He told you about that?" Zhen asked, his disbelief forming the words before he had a chance to say what he intended to. Then, quickly: "It was a joke! He was supposed to laugh."

"Well, when your logic starts to make sense, then you can criticize mine."

Zhen stopped, just a few feet from the entry hatch. "Hey, at least I'm not the one who tried to make a sword out of light."

Yen Sa's expression darkened instantaneously. "It will work," he managed, his face and jaw unusually tight.

Zhen took a step back from the scowl he was receiving. "Sorry," he said. "I'm sure it will. Just don't send a bolt of light at me like you did those pirates."

The honor guard's thirteenth member shook his head almost apathetically. "That was just pretty colored light, Zhen. It couldn't have hurt anyone."

Then he walked away, cradling the box as though it were a child.

* * *

><p>Li Yuen Ming watched as the last of the battle's spoils were loaded onto a Mandalorian ship. The colonists had taken their time gathering their belongings and anything they thought might be of use, piling into the ships that had come to rescue them, as theirs had been destroyed by the pirates. They were filling the last spaces on

the ships with the loot from the pirate ships. Most of itâ€"food supplies and clothingâ€"she hoped they would never need, intending to return to Mandalore long before their current supplies dwindled, but they had been pleased to find the pirates' backup weapons on their ships. Officers would be allocated with a weapon during flight and instructed to familiarize themselves with it. They intended to be prepared for any future hostility.<p>

As she watched Yen Sa finally exit the freighter, holding an object that his posture suggested was a valuable find, and Zhen Feng Qui trailing behind him, she heard her husband instruct Captain Lan Yiao Nih to ensure that the pirates were securely enclosed in one of the colony's buildings. She turned to him. "We're almost ready to depart?"

"Yes. We really should board now. Captain Lan should be the last person to board any ship."

"Good," she said, then her serious expression spread into a smile. "We can finally leave this wretched place."

Li Wei Yong returned her expression. "Home awaits us." He glanced once more around the nearly empty colony, then approached the Templar Aria's ramp, entering the ship. Ming followed him.

Not a minute after they entered the bridge, Lan Yiao Nih sprinted aboard, waving his hand at the Aria's pilot, Lieutenant Nai Do Xian. "Pirates are secure and everyone's aboard." He paused to take a breath. "Let's get out of here."

"Yes, please," agreed Ta Lian Shi from where he lay on the floor with his eyes closed and hands folded in a protest against somethingâ€"either that he had been forced to actually work or the unfairness of life in general; Ming couldn't decide which was more likely, but she was quite pleased that she no longer had to hear him whine.

The others murmured their agreement, from Rah Cai Yue's quiet, "Amen" to Kei Sa's slight smile and nod. Yen Sa was the only honor guard not to react, but that was only expected, as he was expending all his efforts on an attempt to secure his prize, which based upon his enthusiasm could only be seen as important. Whether it was important to everyone and not just their electronics expert was unclear.

"Agreed," Ming said, and the lieutenant throttled up the Aria, leading the Mandalorian convoy back into outer space.

Ming closed her eyes, relaxing into her chair. Home. Mandalore. She knew its appearance from space as well as any could, and it was a gem every bit as beautiful as those after which its inhabited coasts were named. Perhaps on their home world they could find rest and sanctuary andâ€"

Something crackled.

Ming opened her eyes. "Yen Sa? Was that your new device?"

"No," he said, shaking his head as he walked to the front of the bridge to stand by the lieutenant. "It was the comm system." He

wiggled switches and the comm system crackled again.

A message was barely audible through long bursts of static: "â€"traffic lanesâ€"forcedâ€"ble you."

"Huh?" said Lian, still lying on the floor.

Ming shook her head and waved her hand at him in a silencing gesture, not realizing his eyes were still closed as she strained to hear.

"â€"Spaceportâ€"violationâ€"lanesâ€"shut downâ€" "

"Violation?" asked Ming. Yen Sa fiddled with the switches.

"Unidentified ship!" the com system emitted, the message coming louder with much fewer bursts of static and startling everyone on the bridge. "â€"trespassing onâ€"shut down engines immediâ€"disable you!"

"Trespassing in space?" asked Tieh Chen Yi.

"Disable!" Lieutenant Nai was far more concerned, glancing backward from the pilot's chair.

A moment later came a flash of light, a much larger burst of light, and a shock wave that tore through the ship.

Lian tumbled across the floor and smacked against the bridge's starboard wall with a loud groan. Ming fell out of her chair, bruising her right elbow and hip. Lieutenant Nai fought to stabilize the ship's course after he righted himself in his chair.

"What was that?" Ming asked, pushing herself to her knees.

"One of the ships exploding," replied Yen Sa, who had managed to stay on his feet even if he had smacked his forehead against the viewport. His tone was barely audible above the ringing that plagued everyone's hearing. "And what seems to be a small force of fighters rapidly approaching the rear of our convoy."

"What?" said Ming, climbing to her feet.

"And they seem to be fighters identical to those used by our pirate friends," Yen Sa continued.

Lan Yiao Nih looked up in shock.

"What!" Ming fell back to her knees. "Cai Yue! Portal! Now!"

The priest stood, pressing his hands against his head for a brief moment as though trying to alleviate his vertigo. Then he held his hands in front of him. "Wait! Where?"

"Anywhere!" Ming and her husband yelled simultaneously.

"Can you sustain it from the other side?" continued Wei Yong.

"Yes," said Kei Sa, stumbling over to help.

"Then do it," said Wei Yong. "Get us out of here, now!"

The portal appeared as a pinprick of distortion, one that spread into its mature indigo maelstrom with agonizing sloth while all the members of the honor guard except for the portal's creators frantically compared the changing distances between their convoy and the pirate ships, and their convoy and the portal.

A missile from the leading pirate ship tore through the convoy's trailing ship as the *Templar Aria* was swallowed by the portal.

* * *

><p>"What happened back there?" Li Wei Yong let his head stay lowered, talking to the floor more than the rest of the honor guard.</p>

Through the viewport they could see the flaming wreckage that remained of one of their ships. Six hadn't come through the portal, destroyed by the forces at their previous location. Four had been heavily damaged and rescuers from other non- or minorly damaged ships scrambled to evacuate them or stabilize their condition; they'd already failed once, leaving an entire ship burning in space with its passengers and a handful of rescuers. They were innocent ships, civilian ships.

"We were attacked by ships that were nearly identical to those used by the pirates at our colony," muttered Yen Sa, his voice low because he knew he was stating the obvious.

"Because someone obviously didn't do his job well enough," continued Lian with an irritating smirk, leaning back into his chair.

"What?" said Captain Lan, leaning forward, his sudden tension the antithesis to Lian's typical leisure. "Are you implying that I didn't secure the pirates?"

"There wasn't much implying involved."

The captain clenched his teeth. "Why? Why wouldn't I have?"

"Because you didn't feel like it?"

"What?"

"Tell me, Captain," said Lian, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table and fold his hands, almost unbearably patronizing, "when's the last time you actually cared? I mean about other people's welfare, not your own glory."

"This from you? Mr. Oh-please-don't-make-me-work Ta?"

"When I'm given a job, I do it, and I do I right."

"Oh, of course. When you're not napping somewhere with a better climate, that is. Tell me, Lian, where were you this morning?"

"Anything I could do was of little importance," Lian said without

apology.

Captain Lan rose from his chair, seething. "You hypocrite."

"Shut up!" Ming snapped, then continued more quietly. "Captain, sit down. Perhaps there's an explanation for this besides incompetence on the captain's part."

"Willful negligence on the captain's part?"

"Lian, shut up!" Ming folded her hands into fists and slammed them on the table. "Anyone else?"

Two seconds passed before Yen Sa ventured, "The pirates could have communication devices we're not aware of," beginning the semi-chaos that accompanied their discussions.

"They could have been lying in wait," offered Rah Cai Yue.

"But it wasn't just pirates," said Nai Do Xian. "The communication sounded like it was from planetary officials."

"Why would planetary officials want to blow up our ships?" Tieh Chen Yi asked.

"They said we were trespassing," noted Hua Quy Ling. "Maybe it was supposed to be a warning shot. Our ships are a lot weaker than theirs."

"They have shields," said Yen Sa.

"You'd think they'd scan for that before firing," said Li Wei Yong.

"Maybe it was an accident," said Rah Cai Yue.

"Maybe," said Ming. Then her expression soured. "Maybe they were just looking for an excuse."

Her comment ended the torrent, beginning a pause of several seconds.

"What have we done to anger them so much?" Tieh Chen Yi asked.

"Existed," Kei Sa said.

24. II

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

II.

* * *

><p>"Any particular reason you picked this place?" Li Wei Yong asked when the Templar landed, thankfully ending their time of uneasy silence and brooding.

"It was a panic situation, okay?" said Rah Cai Yue. "It was the easiest place to get to, so here we are." He stood and glanced through the viewport with a shrug. "Maybe we can use the cliffs for something."

"It's some place to start at least," agreed Wei Yong. "And we do have plenty of scrap metal to work with," he added, remembering the colonists' dilapidated houses.

Cai Yue grinned. "Right to work, then?" he asked, a weary tone belying his expression.

"As much as we'd all like to just go home now, we have ships to repair before that can happen, and a base to set up if we're going to repair those ships."

Tieh Chen Yi spoke sullenly. "I don't see why you didn't just make the portal to Mandalore. And then we'd all be home now. It is a place we've all been, after all."

Cai Yue shook his head. "A portal like that, ignoring physical position entirely and basing its location upon memory, takes far more time and energy. All I did was reopen the one we came through, which took about a third of the time as it would have to do it your way, and we still took quite a beating. I doubt we'd have made it home had we tried."

"So how long's it going to take us to repair these ships?" Chen Yi consented with a sigh.

"That depends on whether this place is sufficient to support us and whether the people here leave us alone."

"The people who attacked this colony were from off-planet, right?" said Hua Quy Ling.

"Who knows?" said Wei Yong. "Either way, I doubt we should stay here too long."

"Right to work, then," sighed Lian, pushing himself out of his chair with exaggerated effort and pointedly ignoring the glare his action prompted from Captain Lan.

"Cai Yue," Zhen said rather than rise with others, "if we knew exactly where a really close planet was, do you think the damaged ships could survive a trip through a portal?"

The priest raised his eyebrows in surprise, then tilted his head to the side, "Well, I guess they might. I'm not the engineer here."

The Queen's Honor Guard turned to Yen Sa in unison.

"Not the most damaged ones, of course, but most of them could, sure." He nodded.

"That's reassuring," said Ming, "but have we all forgotten our earlier problems? We don't know of any close planets, let alone exactly where they are. The star charts we have are nothing but how the constellations look from the colony. Helpful for figuring out

what direction to head, but no planets are marked."

"No, my queen, you're wrong," said Yen Sa, not withholding a silly smile. He pressed a button on his box and a breathtaking display of a galaxy burst into life above it. "I guess you all thought my latest find was some useless light device again, right?"

The hint of bitterness in the statement distracted Wei Yong from the display for a moment, but he stared, fully transfixed on the display, with the others when Yen Sa pressed more buttons and the map focused on a single planet.

"This is actually where we were before," explained Yen Sa, "I can bring it up easily because it knew that was where it was when I found it, and I think it still thinks it's there."

"It thinks?" asks Chen Yi.

"Well, actually I think they had it attached to their navigational computer, but it could have a great deal of intelligence itself. We really don't know what their computers are capable of. Far more than ours, I'm sure."

"This is the whole galaxy?" Wei Yong asked.

"Yes." Yen Sa glanced at Zhen and corrected, "well, not the whole galaxy, but most of it, certainly."

Zhen smiled back widely, an obviously false, overdone expression, a gesture that Wei Yong didn't understand.

"It might take a while," continued Yen Sa, "but I know I can find this planet, and some nearby habitable ones, one of which will hopefully make a good place to set up a base."

"I think this is the best news I've heard since we got here," said Wei Yong. "Yen Sa, you get to work in here. Everyone else, outside." Wei Yong turned and stepped toward the door, then stopped and exhaled deeply as he saw Lian step aside with a snide expression to let Lan Yiao Nih go through the doorway first. "Uh, Lianâ€"

"Lian," Kei Sa said, "get some paper and help Yen Sa."

"I don't really need help," said Yen Sa looking up from the map a little uncertainly. "And I don't think any of you couldâ€"

"Yes, you do," interrupted Ming. "Lian, you can use the back of our paper maps, if you need to."

"Anything you say, my queen," Lian said, though his malicious smirk couldn't rival the one Lan Yiao Nih had perfected years before.

"We don't need this," Wei Yong sighed under his breath as he left the Templar's bridge.

* * *

><p>The damp chill in the air only made things more miserable. Hours of shoddy attempts at building something useful had passed. Too many hours, and Rah Cai Yue was certain that the cough he was developing

would not just go away when he was exposed to blessedly dry air on the Templar again.

"These caves are mildewy, all right," he muttered to himself, "but they're certainly not nice."

"What was that?" called Lan Yiao Nih from further back in the cave.

"Just my pathetic grumbling," he answered, watching the glow of the captain's sunstone shift in the darkness and descend further.

"It's actually pretty dry back here," the captain said. "Well, relatively speaking anyway. I think we could probably get a whole ship-full back here. They'd be squeezed, but they'd get over it."

Cai Yue stepped forward and looked down at the drop to the level the captain explored. "Yeah, well, is there anything really interesting down there that requires my attention? I'm not going down there if I don't have to."

"What?" asked the captain, walking back to the steep incline. "Are you scared of a little cave?"

"You do realize we left the only person who would have wanted to do this in the ship."

"Oh, the slacker?"

Cai Yue cringed as the captain's expression soured into one worse than usual. "Yeah, the slacker. Sorry."

Captain Lan stepped on a boulder at the bottom and in three quick motions was climbing to his feet beside Cai Yue at the top.

The priest took a reflexive step backward at the spontaneity of the captain's movements, then forced a nod. "So we could get a ship-full in here and station some guards by the opening, and then the guards could get slaughtered from the outside but hopefully they could kill enough to make it worth itâ€" "

"And then the colonists could all be trapped in a nice wet cave when they bomb the opening and it collapses."

"Yeah." Cai Yue grimaced, nodding his head several times. "What are we doing here?" he sighed.

"Hopefully someday we get to kill a lot of these people for attacking our colonists." Yiao Nih crossed his arms and smiled mirthlessly.

"Lofty goals," Cai Yue said, turning away.

"I suppose you think it was my fault the pirates escaped, too."

"I'm sure you locked them up as well as any of us could have," Cai Yue said. He breathed slowly, then continued, "You did, didn't you?"

"Yes," Lan Yiao Nih hissed. "Yes, I did." He turned from the priest, walking swiftly to the cave's entrance and pausing when he reached it only to grab the rope and begin his descent.

"I hope you did," Cai Yue whispered, following him at a much slower pace. A traitor was the absolute worst development he could imagine. Everyone else in the foreign galaxy seemed to be working against them; to have another, someone on the inside, was almost inconceivable. Everyone seemed determined to drive the Mandalorians away, except perhaps the alien they had encountered in the market near the first colony they rescued. He had been hostile, but more so to the humans than the Mandalorians, prompting Cai Yue to believe that it was his normal attitude toward everything. Calyaar, had he said he was? Not that it mattered; they had no chance even if a single alien hadn't hated them on sight. No chance as it was, and if there was a traitor... He prayed that the captain was entirely honest.

It was only as he neared the bottom of the cliff that he realized a ruckus had developed in the abandoned colony. He literally slid the last ten feet, a jolt traveling up his body as he hit the ground, causing his legs to ache momentarily as he began his run.

Nearly everyone was armed, most with their steel weapons, some of the army with the confiscated gun-type weapons, which they pointed with insecure glances about to see how the others were holding theirs. Cai Yue brushed through the crowd, reaching to his back to draw his sword but finding only the thick cotton of his coat. Regardless of his lack of weapon, he continued toward the center of the commotion. He stopped beside Ming, who breathed heavily, holding her double-bladed staff in front of her as a barrier.

"Please," said a human from the group that had been surrounded by armed Mandalorians. "Put away your blasters and those...swords."

"Why should we?" hissed Ming, her jaw clenched. "How do we know you're not armed?" She seemed on the threshold of collapse, thrust into a situation that she wasn't sure how to handle. Cai Yue quickly glanced over the honor guard assembled around the humans who stood with arms raised. No Kei Sa, no General Li.

"Lady, do I look armed?" snapped the human.

"You certainly have them," muttered Zhen, receiving an elbow in the stomach from Hua Quy Ling as the only reply.

"We don't know what you could be hiding. We have no reason to trust you." Ming's muscles were tensed to such a point that Cai Yue wondered why they didn't all cramp.

"Look, you're the ones who are always armed with the elements or something like that, not us!" The man was beginning to lose his composure, his words meant for reassurance turning into shouts. "We humans are helpless without our weapons!"

Cai Yue whispered in Mandalorian to Ming, "Why's he trying to make us think he's harmless?"

She shook her head in a restricted motion but with enough vigor to

send stray hairs whipping in both directions. "Why are you here? If not to attack us and force us away like everyone else, then why?"

"This place was abandoned and now you're all milling around and you expect us to not notice? Look, we don't know who attacked this place earlier, but it wasn't us!"

"How does he know we were attacked?" Cai Yue whispered again.

Ming nodded her head once.

"Maybe," said a deep-voiced human from farther back in the group, "it was those clones."

Cai Yue heard the sharp hiss of Ming's breath even as he felt his own heart jolt.

Clones? As in evil abominations of nature created by evil to fulfill their evil ways? The choice diversion of such fiends as the Sorceress Ennir and the successor to her powers, Shang Tsung?

"Ming..." he whispered in warning.

She shifted her balance, flexing her hands and re-gripping the staff. "I don't care who you are," she said carefully, "why you've come here, or what you may claim to know. You leave. Now."

"Lookâ€" "

"Now." Ming spun her staff twice in a second, cleaving out a piece of turf that landed near the feet of the human.

"You people are insane," said the human as they retreated, eventually disappearing into the forest outside the colony.

Yuen Ming watched them go, her eyes remaining fixed on the woods even a minute after the humans had vanished. Neither her body relaxed nor her grip on her staff.

Cai Yue stepped forward to face her. "Ming." He raised his eyebrows after a second of silence. "Ming. Ming," he repeated.

"Ming," echoed Li Wei Yong, running beside Kei Sa from the base of the cliffs.

She jolted and turned, throwing her staff to the ground with excessive force.

"Sorry," the general said, as they neared, seeming wary of her anger. "We didn't know."

"I felt something," Kei Sa explained. "But it seemed to hover like a distant threat, not an immediate one. I apologize, my queen."

"I'm not sure you were wrong, Kei Sa," said Cai Yue. "I don't think it was an immediate threat."

"The humans were here, weren't they?" asked the general.

"Yes, but they weren't armed." Cai Yue kicked the displaced grass back into place and Ming shuddered, grabbing her husband's arm for support as she fought the nausea her mutilation of the grass had caused, her mind finally clear enough to feel it.

"They weren't attacking?" Li Wei Yong helped Ming regain her balance. She threw his arm away as soon as she had recovered.

"I think they wanted us to trust them, for some reason. It all seemed far too suspicious for my liking."

"And the clones," added Hua Quy Ling. "They still have Ennir's clones."

"I find that hard to believe," said Cai Yue. "How many millennia has it been? No, the problem is who has Ennir's type of power and can make these clones?"

"So even this galaxy isn't free from the evils of the Demon," said Tieh Chen Yi.

"Maybe the person making these clones is someone related to Shao Kahn," said Zhen.

"What?" asked Cai Yue, and everyone turned to the tall fighter.

"Yen Sa and that map of his," he explained. "He pointed out that maybe we're from the blank spot in this map and this is the only habitable galaxy. And if that was the case, then Shao Kahn wouldn't have conquered galaxies, so where did he come from? Maybe here. Maybe there's more like him."

The honor guard stood in stunned silence.

"Zhen," sighed Cai Yue, covering his face with his hands. "I think you just erased the last traces of our feelings of well-being."

"I think you just made it impossible for us to just leave and forget about this place," said Li Wei Yong.

"Yeah, way to go," Captain Lan said, slapping the taller man a little too hard on the back. "Now we can't go home."

25. III

The Queen's Honor Guard
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III.

* * *

><p>The abrasively dry wind gusting across the field was enough to keep him awake, even if he hadn't had numerous pressing thoughts vying for his conscious attention. The wrap covering his gills was nearly dry; he'd have to rewet it in a few minutes or risk agonizing irritation, or possibly illness, the next day. But it was these altogether too frequent quiet moments that wore upon him more harshly

each time and made him wonder if he really even cared anymore. The pain might at least remind him that he was alive.<p>

"Leer."

He identified the voice at once and jumped to his feet, turning to face it. "General Tascilo," he said, a typical mocking tone coming easily to his voice, "why are you here? Have you walked all this way just to speak to me?"

"Cut the sarcasm, Leer," said Tascilo, a medium-sized man whose once dark hair had turned mostly gray. "You know why I'm here, and you know your little message was the reason."

"So you actually do listen to me, General," said Braeden with a single, exaggerated nod. "You must be the only one."

"I find it's beneficial to have an information link that wanders a more backwater path than I can manage anymore," Tascilo explained.

"Oh," Braeden stretched the syllable, crossing his arms. "So now I'm your little mimic-sprite, to sit on your shoulder and whisper in your ear. Or has it always been that way?"

"I value your opinion, Leer; that's not changed," Tascilo said firmly. "I've always thought your situation stank of unfair politics."

"And politics, as we all know, is not something that blesses you with understanding."

"Why thank you, Leer," said the general, his voice drenched with sarcasm.

"Likewise, General."

"And if we could now address the situation at hand?"

Braeden closed his eyes. "I met some Mandalorians."

"So your message indicated."

"They weren't half-bad."

"I suppose you sympathized with them, didn't you."

Braeden opened his eyes a slit. "There are some who know what it's like to be discriminated against, General."

"Someone called you 'pond scum' again."

"Lots of people call me 'pond scum' on a regular basis."

Tascilo crossed his arms. "So after you finished bonding with your fellow downtrodden species...?"

"They only wanted to know who attacked their colony, General."

"For revenge purposes?"

"Probably. Does it matter? The Republic does it all the time."

"The Republic is not the subject of this questioning," Tascilo said flatly. "So they seemed not at all like clones?"

"Clones?" Braeden straightened. "Are they supposed to be?"

"There have been rumors, yes."

"Well, the three I spoke with were quite different from each other physically. Although they did have a strange aura."

"So they could have been clones of three different people?"

"Is it really that important, General?" Braeden crossed his arms and feet, relaxing his spine.

"People are uncomfortable with the idea of clones. They like to think their life is precious and unique."

"'Precious' and 'unique' are not adjectives I would use to describe most people."

"Yes, well, you're jaded," said Tascilo with a psuedo-polite smile.

"So're you, General. And you don't feel that way either."

"So I don't. The average person does, though, and the average person is what those of us in responsibility positions in the Republic are forced to think of."

"Pity. They don't deserve the attention."

Tascilo sighed and shook his head. "No one is happy with these Mandalorians' presence. It's rumored that not only are they clones, but also that they have strange powers that far exceed those of the Jedi."

"I find that hard to believe, General. Or have you forgotten that I know the powers of a Jedi and how much they surpass what the general public is ever allowed to see or the average Jedi allowed to use."

"Regardless, the Jedi are not able to create gravity wells, summon water and fire, or poison people from fifty meters away."

"I bet we could if we tried."

"Did you say 'we'?" asked the general in a light tone. "Are you softening, Leer?"

"A slip of the tongue." Braeden clacked his in demonstration. "And good for the Mandalorians. I don't care."

Tascilo raised his eyebrows. "So I suppose you are against the idea of going to war with them."

"War?" The Calyaar's voice raised in volume. "What have they

done?"

"Severely disturbed the people. Disregarded all laws of space-travel in inhabited systems."

"They're entirely naïve about all workings of this galaxy," he argued. "There's no reason to go to war."

"I'm against it, too. But I'm just one tiny little voice in a gallery of thousands."

"It'll be slaughter."

"Not as much as it could be. Palpatine's actually passed a law that no one is to fire upon a Mandalorian ship after that fiasco two days ago."

"Now that's the real news here," Braeden said more slowly.
"Palpatine's prohibiting all-out slaughter?"

Tascilo shrugged, a gesture almost as incredulous as Braeden's tone of voice. "Maybe he's not as bad as some of us think. He is, after all, from Naboo, and they've never condoned violence."

"Except for that one time just before Palpatine became Supreme Chancellor." Braeden grinned, displaying his sharp incisors.

"They didn't actually kill real people face to face, only droids and ships. And that was as a last resort in protection of their world."

"Well, what saints."

Tascilo shook his head and glanced at his chronometer. "I need to get back now. Most of my leisurely walks never last this long."

"So you are ashamed of me."

"You know as well as I that your aid means nothing if I am not respected."

"And we both know that nothing directly involved with me is respected anymore."

"The galaxy's not a nice place."

"You don't have to tell me that, General. You forget that I have been alive three years longer than you, even if I am not old like you."

"I'm not old," said Tascilo, a bit of an irritated tone finally entering his voice.

"Yes, you are," replied Braeden, rubbing his hand through his stiff hair. "See, Calyaar hair is supposed to be white. Human hair, however."

"Oh, shut up, Leer," Tascilo said, walking away.

"Nice to see you, too, General."

* * *

><p>The laughter of Yen Sa and Ta Lian Shi as they watched the display was almost sickening in light of the news. But Hua Quy Ling was never one to rush to anger, taking time to recall that they did not yet know of the presence of clones and the likelihood of a fiend as powerful as Shao Kahn. He only hoped, as he sat in a chair to the side of the bridge, that they had managed to accomplish something instead of spending the entire time distracted by the peculiarities of the various planets they were examining, as they seemed to be as he had walked in. This suitable planet they were supposed to be searching for was their best chance, because 'worthless' was the only word that truly described the colony.</p>

And 'hopeless' the only fitting adjective for any attempt to defeat the fiend behind the cloning if he were anything like Kahn. He thought they should leave: leave the issue of clones, leave the mystery of the Jedi, and leave the defeat of the fiend in the hands of the heathen people who inhabited the galaxy.

Not that Quy's opinion held much weight. Any decisions were made by Li Wei Yong and Kei Sa, and while he had influence on one of those leadersâ€"didn't he?â€"anything they said could be overridden by the queen and modified to her whim, and whims seemed to be one of her specialties. And the inhabitants of this galaxy didn't seem capable of dealing with powers like the Mandalorians', so how could they deal with a threat like Kahn? The Jedi could, perhaps, if he had inferred correctly about what they were, and if they knew the fiend existed.

But Quy doubted any argument of circumstance would deter the Mandalorians from what responsibility and honor dictated them to do. So he hoped Yen Sa and Lian had found them a planet.

He was not the only one.

Followed by the rest of the honor guard, Yuen Ming hurried onto the bridge, seating herself just as quickly. "Yen Sa, if you will give Cai Yue the location of our destination."

"If they've bothered to try finding one," muttered Lan Yiao Nih.

Lian raised his eyebrows and spoke in a soft tone that nevertheless suggested hostility. "We worked quite diligently and have had a planet in mind for quite some time, for your information, but what took you so long? Laziness getting the better of you?"

"That's enough," commanded Ming, stressing each consonant. "Yen Sa?" she said with a sigh.

"Of course," he answered, frowning at the unease on the honor guards' faces. "Is something wrong?"

"Remember your little theory," said Zhen, "about Shao Kahn originating in this galaxy?"

"It was just a thought, one of those crazy theories that pops in my head without real logic," said Yen Sa.

"Well, there are clones in this galaxy. And something's making them."

"Are you saying there's another Shao Kahn here?" Lian said.

"That's what we're going to find out," said the general.

"_After_ we set up a base," said the queen.

"Of course," Yen Sa said again, hearing the urgency in her voice and turning back to adjust the display of his map as Cai Yue looked on, memorizing a location.

* * *

><p>It was too quiet as they left, Yen Sa thought, both on the bridge of the Templar and in the space surrounding the planet. He hadn't meant his musings to be taken in any serious context, and part of him longed to announce that he didn't think it was possible that they were from this same galaxy, and therefore likely that Kahn was from some far away place and not this galaxy, and therefore likely that nothing like Kahn lurked in this galaxy, and therefore likely that if they just went home and left it all alone nothing bad would happen at all. The part he carefully restrained was the same part that only wished to go home, the part that wanted itself to be happy no matter the damage caused to those around him. The part that he always felt the great heroes spoken of for centuries either lacked or entirely suppressed. That part he would always struggle to keep inside, for wasn't that attitude of self above all others what caused slavery and allowed it to continue?

But the tranquility all around him bothered him more the further they got into space, and still no ships had been spotted around what seemed a fairly busy, populated planet. Disturbing as his thoughts may have been, the eerie silence was far more, stopping his thoughts to create its twin in his mind.

He felt no shock and surprisingly little horror as the ships whose absence he had noticed suddenly appeared from behind a dusty red moon, fighters of a different style than they had previously encountered. They flew in tight formation, their movement and appearance remarkably cohesive in comparison to the attackers they had encountered before. As he stared, they fired missiles in tandem, closing on the Mandalorian convoy.

The silence was broken by the explosions of three ships throughout the line, but the quiet within remained, indigo energies ahead already coalescing through the frantic efforts of Rah Cai Yue and Kei Sa, the others unable to do anything but stare, both helpless and amazed.

Yen Sa rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, allowing the shock waves from another exploding ship to smash him against the wall. The portal was almost done, but too far aheadâ€"not Cai Yue's fault, for he had to set his portal in a certain place to align it correctly. Yen Sa wondered how long it would be before the fighters outside targeted the Templar and how many missiles it would take to destroy it.

His skin tingled and he recognized the wavering distortions caused by the presence of Vyrenchi energy. Honor, here to protect the queen. He could shield her from heat, but give her heat if she had to abandon ship? Oxygen? Pressure? Would the other twelve Vyrenchi try to do the same for the rest of the honor guard? What about Tieh Chen Yi's girlfriend?

No, the fighters were out of missiles. Their ship would be destroyed by the lancing beams of light they used for a weapon. How many direct hits would it take those to destroy them?

Light? Yet another aggravating reminder of how close he was with his invention.

One of the red beams hit the ship just to the back of the Templar and its heat reversed direction, blossoming into an explosion on that ship's hull, and certainly breaching it.

Light? Energy? Simple to block, not simple to emulate.

A fighter crossed the path of another that was firing, and Yen Sa cringed, anticipating another explosion, but the beam splashed around the ship, diffused, it seemed, and probably weakening the shield. Convenient for them that such a wretched mistake didn't cause their destruction. Pity they couldn't absorb it to strengthen themselves.

Light? Energy? Absorption?

"My queen!" he shouted. She looked startled, jolting up from a hunched position. "The Vyrenchi are here?"

"Honor?" she said.

=Yes, Yuen Ming,= Honor replied, taking a moment to form his mental projection.

"Are the others here?"

=Yes, Yuen Ming.=

The queen turned back, directing a questioning look at Yen Sa.

"Honor, you can capture the energy they are using as a weapon, right?" he said.

=We can, Yen Sa.=

"And can you redirect it back to them still as a weapon?"

The white-clad projection tilted its head. =We can try.=

"And how many of you would it take to protect each ship?"

"Ming, we're fools," whispered the general.

=We will petition for support from our planet as we work,= said Honor, then vanished.

A split second later, the fighters outside scattered as the 'unarmed, defenseless' ships suddenly deflected their shots and fired back. By the time they had regrouped into an organized force, the last of the Mandalorian ships slipped through the portal.

* * *

><p>"As we all know," said Li Wei Yong, looking out to the yellow-grassed planet that they were slowly approaching, "today we have stumbled across a method that has enabled us to survive even direct attacks by enemy ships. The Vyrenchi have sent reinforcements, enough for three to a ship. The question is: does this give us the power to fight them on their own turf?" He turned. "Yen Sa?" he asked. "You're the scientist, and the light elemental. What do you think?"<p>

"Sir?" The younger man blinked, looking up from the table surface. "Um, no sir, I don't think we can. Even with three Vyrenchi per ship, each Vyrenchi can only attack one bolt at a time. And perhaps no one else was watchingâ€"understandablyâ€"but even their attacks last time did only a minor portion of the damage as they did to us with each shot. Their ships have shields and we'd have to pound at them a long time to do any sort of damage."

=And that was with us storing several bolts for energy to attack,= Honor mewed mournfully.

"No, it's not your fault," Ming soothed quietly.

"Hey," said Lian. "At least we can defend ourselves now. We don't have to live in constant fear of a group of ships coming around the horizon with weapons flaring."

"I think you live in constant fear anyway," said Captain Lan.

"You're quite out of line, Captain," Wei Yong snarled, resisting the temptation to rip the man's throat out.

"General," Yen Sa said calmly, as though oblivious to rising tensions, "even their shields are worn down over time by laser blasts. Ours are only strengthened. If a ship gets hit by more than three bolts at the exact same time, the extras are going to get through. But unless we are terribly outnumbered, we're not going to have much to worry about as long as we concentrate on leaving."

"But what about the missiles?" asked Lieutenant Nai.

Yen Sa sighed. "I had forgotten about them. We're just going to have to hope that not many ships have them."

"So you say," said Wei Yong, "that to fight against these people, we're going to have to fight with their sort of weapon?"

"Either their weapon or something they can't comprehend or defend themselves against, like our elements."

"So, how long until you can make us lasers, Yen Sa?"

A brief look of shock crossed the boy's face. "I already have a

device that can generate damaging light. What I need is lots of barrels to direct the light, probably with a handle because it's going to get hot, and to teach all the soldiers to give the sunstones a little of their inner power in quick bursts. And the time it would take me to replicate all the circuitry."

"So you're saying we're better off stealing their weapons."

"Hey, why not?" said Zhen. "If they think they can just go around killing us then I think we can go around stealing their stuff. Which is the lesser of the two evils?"

"Zhen, shut up," said Ming.

"Um, General?" Yen Sa bit his lip.

"What is it?" Wei Yong said.

"You do realize that the technology we'd have to use to make laser guns is just a scarcely modified version of this." And he set his failed light sword on the table.

Wei Yong sighed and allowed his shoulders to hunch slightly. "Does it work now?"

"Does it work? Well, I've kept it on for a full hour without it losing its stability and shattering like it did at the meeting—that was partially a fault of a glitchy circuit and partially my own mental weakness. I've also added a mirrored guide to help direct the light in the proper direction, taking some strain off the mind, and I've found that every day I use it, it becomes a little easier. Now, it takes almost no effort. Just a little more than turning on a sunstone. But, of course, it tires you out if you use for long periods of time, because you are channeling your actual body's energy into it to make it dangerous to others. But for that very reason, it cannot hurt you, which I think is quite the advantage."

"Then it works."

Yen Sa ceased his rambling, lowered his head, and said softly, "It needs field testing."

Wei Yong nodded once. "Very well."

"What?" Yen Sa looked up. "Really?"

"Just," Wei Yong faltered, somewhat surprised himself that he was agreeing, "take your real sword with you in case that doesn't work."

"Really?" Yen Sa repeated. "Thank you, sir. I won't forget this, and you won't be disappointed."

"I hope not," Wei Yong muttered under his breath, because he knew it was their only real chance at an advantage.

>by Nyohah<p>

IV.

* * *

><p>It was a surprisingly pleasant planet: the wind was dry and brutally gusting across the tall, scratchy grass, but the clean air, open spaces and lack of population reminded Tieh Chen Yi and Hseh An of home.<p>

They stood outside in air refreshingly filled with the smells of soil and grass, staring up at the shipless space around the planet—they had seen only one ship, leaving as they approached, and it hadn't seemed to notice them—and smiled that even their base was something with which they were familiar: a rustic, abandoned mill—perhaps the grass wasn't just grass?

They had hidden most of the ships in a stretch of eroded canyon, less visible if not quite hidden, and only the necessities, the honor guard, and a few extra soldiers had been unloaded into the mill. The civilians were told to stay on their ships and be ready to leave whenever they needed to.

Hseh An's upbringing and her consequential familiarity with hard work had lifted her above the common rank of 'civilian' to something substantially more useful. She used the calm moment to tell Chen Yi of her efforts with the data cards they had taken from the pirate ship.

"It took a lot of time," she said, breaking off the brittle tip of a blade of grass, "deciphering and translating and fitting it all together, but it wasn't so hard."

"You're just lucky Yen Sa showed you how to work the machine to read those cards," Chen Yi replied, taking her hand and pulling her a few steps farther from the mill.

"And really lucky that Rah Cai Yue had a dictionary translating English to Mandalorian—where and why he came by that I'll never know. Sometimes I don't quite understand him. He certainly doesn't act like a priest."

"Don't feel bad about that, An. Sometimes no one quite understands him. But it is well known that he has an unusually high interest in the planet Earth."

She smiled back at him. "I'm just glad I didn't have to take the time of someone who actually knows English. Can you believe that no one outside the honor guard does?"

"We never thought we would have to."

"Then the spellings weren't quite the same," she continued. "This Basic is more phonetic than English. Makes more sense."

"I think for them to use it as the primary language for the galaxy as a whole they'd have to—"

"Make it an easy language to learn!" Oh! She paled a little,

embarrassed at her lapse of proper womanly meekness. "I really didn't mean to interrupt like that. I'm just excited and nervous andâ€" "

"It's all right. You don't have to apologize." He squeezed her hand, and she smiled again.

"I hope it's as good a medicine as the cards seem to indicate," she said looking down at the ground. "We should probably be getting back. We are testing it soon."

"Of course," he said, and they turned to head back. "But this stuffâ€"what did they call it?"

"Bacta," An ventured, stumbling on the pronunciation and blushing slightly.

"This bacta," he pronounced it no betterâ€"she blushed more, "I guess I just can't seem to dissociate yellowy-green liquid from acid in my mind."

"Most acids are clear," she scarcely more than whispered. "Like water...they're diluted in water."

"I know that now," Chen Yi said, shaking his head slightly, "but I could swear that when sick as a child, I vomited stomach acid, and it was that color."

"This is a botanical product, not stomach acid."

He stopped and clutched both her hands. "Look, An, I don't want you to try it on yourself."

"Who else?" she said. "I must be the only one of all of us who isn't afraid."

"But that's why you shouldn't! If everyone else is frightened, shouldn't you be?"

"No one else has read about it like I have, Chen Yi. Someone who is afraid might imagine something bad is happening when there is really only good."

"And your faith in the stuff might cause you to ignore the bad or see it as good."

She sighed. "Chen Yi, you must realize there is no one else willing. And what would happen if we force someone who isn't willing and something bad does happen?"

He gave her arms a shake. "I'm willing!"

"But you and the rest of the honor guard are too important. If it is toxicâ€" "

"Toxic?" He sucked in breath in almost-panicked little gasps. "An, you can't!"

"Chen Yi, don't take this away from me," she said sternly, pulling her arms from his grasp. "I have sat this whole trip until now with

nothing to do, so just don't take this away from me. At home maybe I did nothing for my reasons and everything just because it was my duty and I was supposed to, whether or not I wanted to, but at least I was always able to help. My work was always worth something. This is my chance to help, so don't take this away from me, Chen Yi, don't."

He turned his head half away from her, staring at the grass. "The queen really has corrupted you. I guess I should have listened to Lian back at home."

"I'm not sure there is any situation where that would be advisable."

And much as he hated and fought it, he couldn't keep a smile from his face as he turned back to her.

* * *

><p>The only other passenger on the shuttle was the governor of the barely populated planet, headed for Coruscant to speak with the Senator of his quadrant in a fuss over a recent decision as though the wishes of a few hundred were to be elevated above those made by a Senator representing a few billion, the votes of the few billion disregarding that nearly half were of a barely sentient rodent labor race.</p>

But all 'due respect'â€"a term Braeden Leer abhorred almost as much as fiendishly conservative leaders who championed millennia-old musings as absolute lawâ€"aside, the man kept glancing at him, even as he ate the nauseating steamed vegetables of the shuttle's vegetarian mealâ€"why was it that they never served carnivorous meals?

So after Braeden had finished eating the scarce meat of his meal and cleaning the scraps from between his twin sets of pointed incisors with his tongue, he said, "And your problem is?"

He heard the man's chair move as he jerked in surprise. "You look familiar... I was on Coruscant a few years ago and I can't stop thinking that I saw you or a picture of you there."

"Humans tend to not be observant enough to distinguish between individuals in an alien races."

"You're not a very polite manâ€"err, alien."

"I'm Calyaar. And you're a politician, so what right have you to criticize?"

The man shut up for a few blessed minutes after an offended grunt. Then: "Did you see that big string of ships back before we entered hyperspace?"

See? Braeden sighed deeply. "Yes, I 'saw' them." In a manner of speaking, his abilities allowed him to see things more clearly than the sharpest of sight. He resented having to resort to his abilities at any time, but the ships had held a special interest for him.

"What do you suppose they were? We don't get visitors like that very

often. Were they from Coruscant do you think? Should I have made the ship turn aroundâ€"you wouldn't have minded, would you?"

For one long second, Braeden considered a lie. That was the Supreme Chancellor come to discuss your ideas personally. or That was the entire Republic army come to obliterate your pathetic little settlement. But he doubted any cruel fiction he could imagine would have less effect than the truth.

"They were Mandalorian ships."

The man gasped and sat up abruptly, splashing his drink across his tray. "Those clones? On my planet?"

Braeden clicked his tongue once. "Funny," he said, "I thought it was the people's planet."

* * *

><p>It stung and she flinched. It began to burn and she grimaced. A rush of potent pain flew up her arm and left in its wake a chilling numb and finally she cried out.</p>

They had a towel rubbing the yellow-green syrup from her arm in an instant, and a bucket of water running down it the next. That served to streak the burning down her arm and she gasped, but it also reduced the pain to a sting as the water pooled on the floor.

The next bucket cooled and removed the sting, but her arm was left with a vacant numb and it pulled at her shoulder with what was surely double its true weight.

The air was pungent with the stink of the syrup, and every breath seared her sinuses, her throat.

She blinked rapidly, then fainted.

* * *

><p>Tieh Chen Yi caught her before she fell off the bench. "An!" He shook her. "An!"</p>

The vapors were a flame in his throat, and his eyes were watering, trying to expel the airborne particles of the syrup from their surface.

"I'm getting her out of here, away from this stuff," he said, lifting Hseh An's limp body and cringing at the sight of her arm, the ivory skin scarlet and swelling.

"Get this mess cleaned up," the general ordered the group of medical officers as he opened the door for Chen Yi.

Chen Yi carried her hurriedly down the hall of the ship until he couldn't smell the stuff anymore, and laid her on a bed in the closest empty room. Her face was flushed but her breathing was steady, if somewhat rushed. The burn on her arm was oozing blood. He gently wiped it away with a clean, soft towel, hoping that the escaping blood would carry with it any remaining contaminants.

"Is she all right?" asked the queen, rushing into the room, followed by her husband, and placing her hand on An's cheek and then her forehead.

"I don't think she's in any immediate danger, but," he swallowed, gently patting more blood away with the towel, "what if it's in her?" His next question came more quickly, "Is she poisoned?" Then, softly and slowly: "Do you think she'll die?"

"We'll have Zhen in to check for poisons as soon as someone finds him." "I've already sent officers after him," said the general. "As for the burn on her arm, I doubt it alone is capable of such dire consequences."

"But we don't really know, do we?" Chen Yi said, his nostrils flaring. "Not with this stuff."

"We'll eject the lot of it, soon as we go into space again. We'll lock it up so no one can take some."

"She'll be fine," said the queen.

"I told her not to do it," Chen Yi said, his angered expression melting.

A medical officer stepped in and saluted. "I found Mr. Zhen."

"That was fast," said the queen.

"Well," said the tallest of the honor guard, leaning on the doorframe, "everyone's in the medical wing of this ship, anyway. Seems An here's not the only situation."

"Who else is hurt?" asked the general abruptly.

"Well, I imagine Kei Sa's in quite a lot of pain."

The queen stood. "Kei Sa! What happened to her?"

"It's all right, queen," Zhen said, raising his eyebrows. "Perfectly natural, actually. But it is a lot of pain. Wasn't it for you?"

"This isn't the time for games, Zhen," said the general.

"All right, all right. She's having her baby."

"Now?" said Ming.

"No, yesterday," said Zhen.

She punched him in the side as she ran out the door.

Zhen straightened. "What's wrong with her?" he asked, pointing at the girl on the bed.

"She tried out the bacta," said the general.

"Bacta?"

"The yellow-green syrup," said Chen Yi.

"Oh, yeah, the yellow-green syrup. Sure." Zhen stepped into the room, looking carefully at An.

"It was the stuff that was supposed to be some sort of medicine, but obviously," Chen Yi pointed to the burn on her arm, "it doesn't work on us."

"Oh, that yellow-green syrup medicine stuff."

"You still don't have any idea what we're talking about." The general crossed his arms.

"I guess I missed the yellow-green syrup medicine meeting." Zhen shrugged.

"Just look at her arm and see if you can find anything foreign in her system."

"Certainly." Zhen grabbed her arm and pushed lightly on the wound, peering intently. An groaned, shifting her head. "Hmm," Zhen said, then suddenly added, "You let her put this on her skin?"

"She'd done the research," explained Chen Yi. "It was supposed to be medicine. I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen. Stubborn."

"Probably gets it from his wife." Zhen jerked his head in the direction of the general.

"Oh, funny," Li Wei Yong responded.

"I think you really should have tracked down your toxins expert when he didn't come to the yellow-green syrup medicine meeting."

"We didn't have a meeting about it," said the general.

"But we have meetings about everything," said Zhen. "Shields and lasers and planets and all other sorts of nonsense!"

"Look, can you just get it out of her!" interrupted Chen Yi.

"Well, it's botanical," said Zhen. "Organic. That's all." He stopped, seeing the panic threatening to overcome the younger fighter, evident in the horrified expression on his face. "Easiest," he lied.

* * *

><p>Coruscant. Population: did anyone have the tenacity to find out? Seat of the galactic government. Center of all politics. Glittering realm of anonymity. For, could anyone be noticeable when millions of their kind were on the planet at any given time and billions of sentients of all forms came and went each day?<p>

Braeden Leer even laughed with some emotion that tried its hardest to mimic true mirth at the actuality that he would be less noticed on the planet from which all condemnation of him had originated than on planets where no one had ever heard of him.

His ship had landed in the middle of everything—the starport that was the least classy and most dangerous, but startlingly close to military ports; that detail made the trip much more enjoyable. If They knew he was so close to such sensitive areas, They would choke, and the thought of that—especially imagining Their specific reactions—brightened his day considerably. He would have to stop by the Galactic Central Library two floors beneath the Council chambers before he left, not be recognized, and gloat to himself that he had been right under Their noses—literally—and They hadn't had a clue. He lived for the little things, anymore.

His starport of choice (with only two passengers, the shuttle pilots had dropped each off at his preferred destination—the politician had chosen the highest-profile) was among the least popular, but because it was Coruscant, even it was amok with tumultuous sound and movement. Such sensory overload always gave him a headache; luckily, he was Calyaar and imbued with special talent in addition to his specie's abilities, and he cycled through the auditory input, choosing a sound to listen to as one might choose a holonet program. Whining children, out; bickering parents, out; general idiots, out; people of various illegal occupations, out; alien speech that was just aurally appalling, out. Panicked-sounding military personnel? Were they high-ranking? He almost grinned in anticipatory glee.

Unfortunately, no. And not too bright from the sound of it. But they definitely had reason to be panicked.

"C'mon, Raon, we can't keep something like this a secret."

"No? Well, then, you go tell the Admiral."

"No way! I'll get court-martialed."

"_You'll_ get court-martialed? You weren't even on duty at the time. You can just tell the Admiral, 'Sir, when I got on duty today, a squadron of your ships had mysteriously gone missing.' I have to try to explain why they went missing while I was on duty!"

"What were you supposed to do? Grab onto their wings and keep them down? We should tell. The Admiral'll understand."

"No, Iveson. These weren't the Admiral's ships. Special Forces ships. They were the General's."

"Tascilo's?" Raon made a sort of squeak—strange sound for a human. "Well, they'll come back, right? And no one'll know they didn't have permission to leave if we don't tell, right?"

Iveson was much less excitable, although still human. "Worse comes to worse, we can claim the Jedi who's on that team made us let them go."

Braeden clicked his tongue as the hangar personnel moved into a turbolift. Jedi were now involved in the theft of Republic armaments and he was the one who was excommunicated?

He entered a turbolift down the row from the ones Raon and Iveson had taken. It was packed with unpleasantly noisy people, but lacked any more interesting military scandals, having only the type of scandal

that the press adored and that threatened politicians' reputations. Choosing the lowest floor available allowed him to have the trip down the last few floors alone and exit the lift into blessed, if slummy, vacancy. But even at this 'frightfully' low level, he was nowhere near even the halfway point of the massive tower.

This level of this tower seemed to be deserted, but only recently, so he found the nearest bridge and headed for the next building. The bridge was probably one of the last that was not enclosed, and he took a deep breathâ€"even the air felt unnatural, empty, and lifeless, but did anyone breathe the outdoor air anymore?â€"and looked down into the darkness that formed long before the ground. Some said no one had been down there for centuriesâ€"he suspected it hadn't been anywhere near that long.

The floor on the next building was still in use and still had the public computer terminal for which he'd been searching, but likely not for much longer. In a continuing struggle for power and prestige in direct defiance to gravity and engineering, the buildings would all receive more floors in an almost predictable order after so many years, and everyone would move up, the top of the galactic hierarchy living in the top floors, everyone else crowding in underneath. He was fairly certain someone somewhere still walked on the actual ground of Coruscant. He was also absolutely certain that the 'somewhere' was not so near the 'galactic center' (quite off-center on the planet, and the planet quite off-center in the galaxy) and that the 'someone' was no human.

The terminal was ridiculously slow, and he thought perhaps it had been disconnected from the planet's network after more than a minute had passed with no result, but with great patienceâ€"something he supposed he was supposed to haveâ€"he was able to send a message:

GT: (That ought to annoy him.)

You're not supposed to lose your ships. (Well, one could never be too helpful. His grandmother had taught him that, although she had meant it in the exact opposite manner than that for which he had adapted it.)

-- The RE-J Committee (A signature that shouldn't alert any suspicion in Tascilo's secretaries or anyone else who might glimpse it, as the Republic had so many committees that only a droid could know them all, and those the general hated. Besides, he'd grown rather fond of the moniker They'd given him, even if he had had to change the first word to 'Radical'. Renegade, indeed. They only wished They had a reason to hunt him down and kill him.)

He clicked the terminal back to its default menu, waited for it to load, and set off to find a place to stayâ€"specifically, the Calyaar district, one of the very few places where Calyaar gathered besides their planet. He couldn't bear to go back home, not after having braved the outside against the advice of those who'd loved him and having been sucked of all worthiness and discarded by the outside, just as those who'd loved him had feared. He had such misfortune in common with every other Calyaar he would meet in the district, although the circumstances of his were unique.

It was such a lovely place, with its abundant pools and air cool with

moisture. Not a 'pond scum!' in hearing distance, even if he suspected the random splashes of color on the walls were that epithet scrawled. Pity the Calyaar couldn't see well enough to read and take offense.

Ah, Coruscant, center of hospitality.

27. V

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

V.

* * *

><p>Kei Sa handled the labor far better than Ming had. Of course, Kei Sa handled everything far better than Ming could ever hope. But Kei Sa had hours left when Yen Sa rushed to the room and stood in the doorway, flushed and distraught.<p>

"Ships," he said simply with a wince.

Ming rose with a start, still tightly gripping Kei Sa's hand.
"Enemy?"

Yen Sa nodded, breathing heavily from the run between the ship in the canyon and headquarters in the mill.

"Find Wei Yong," said Ming. "He's down the hall."

Yen Sa nodded and left.

"Ming, Quy," said Kei Sa, her eyes closed, her normally pale cheeks scarlet from exertion, "go."

"I couldn't," said Hua Quy Ling, still sitting beside her. "I won't."

"You will," said Kei Sa. "I have done this before."

"That doesn't matter. It doesn't make this any less important."

"There's something dangerous out there, Quy. Not just idiot pirates, something powerful. They need you."

"You need me," said Quy.

"If we are killed, it won't matter that you were here to see this child born."

"I have to stay and protect you. What if they find this ship?"

"I can protect myself," said Kei Sa, and an invisible force shoved her husband backward. "I won't let you stay, if I have to push you out and lock the door."

"You're unreasonable." Quy stepped backward to the door, then turned

to follow Ming out.

"I'm frightened."

Quy looked back sharply, but the door closed with a forceful slam.

* * *

><p>Yen Sa found the general standing outside a room, his arms crossed and staring at his feet.</p>

"We're going to be attacked soon, general. Twelve small ships."

The man straightened. "Where's the honor guard?"

"Scattered," said Yen Sa, almost panting. "Which is why I'm trying to gather everyone. And send them back to the mill, because the ships landed not too far from there, and since they didn't attack from the air, I'm suspecting a ground attack."

"We do well against ground attacks."

"If we have troops there to fight!" Yen Sa made a frustrated arm movement, which wasted energy and served no purpose other than to waste the energy without using it to hit someone, which is what he really felt like doing.

"Calm down, Yen Sa," said the general, putting a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I understand. I just don't think it's worth panic when there's such a small force to worry about."

"Kei Sa thinks it is," said the queen, hurrying down the hall, followed by Hua Quy Ling. "She feels something powerful."

"Then we'd better get to the mill," said the general.

"You think so?" said Yen Sa.

"Calm down, Yen Sa," said the queen. "What has gotten into you?"

"I guess I'm just a little panicked," Yen Sa said. "It's just that something tells me when they send such a small force and they don't even use their advantage, that small force must be something formidable. Like us."

"It's a keen observation, Yen Sa," said the general.

"I wouldn't want to fight us."

"Neither would I," said the queen, obviously fighting back a smile.

The general leaned into the room. "Come on, Chen Yi. We have to fight."

"I won't leave An," he said, sounding even more on the verge of panic than Yen Sa.

"Yes you will," said the general. "Zhen doesn't need you here to get out the poison. In fact, I don't think he's even aware of your

presence anymore."

Yen Sa looked in at the tall honor guard who held the young woman's arm, kneeling on the floor with eyes closed in complete concentration. "So we're down to eleven, then?"

"But An needs me," pleaded Chen Yi.

"She doesn't even know you're here," said the general.

Tieh Chen Yi looked as if he'd just been poisoned, too. "How do you know she doesn't? She needs me."

"It's an order, Chen Yi. Unless you want everyone to die." The general turned and walked away. With one last, forlorn glance, Chen Yi followed.

They all sprinted to the mill.

* * *

><p>"I don't know where they're coming from, for the fortieth time!" said Ta Lian Shi, poking random buttons on the panel on the table in the corner. The table was made of the same yellow wood as everything else in the mill and reeked even more, if that was possible.<p>

"Can't that thing tell you?" said Vendetta, whom, judging by the sound of his voice, would have been more aptly named 'Vexation' in the situation.

But he didn't deserve the name as much as Lian, who protested back, "I don't know how to work it!"

"Maybe you shouldn't mess with it," said Nai Do Xian, unflustered as usual.

"Yen Sa'll fix it if I mess it up," argued Lian, "and I'm only messing with it because you're all yelling at me. Where are they coming from, where are they coming from?" He slammed his hand on the panel and it made a strange blurt of a sound. He wished it would crack or something satisfying.

"You were in here when the ships arrived," said Lan Yiao Nih. "Didn't Yen Sa tell you anything? Or were you not listening?"

"He was gone by the time anyone else got here," Rah Cai Yue interrupted, then said to Lian, "Don't you have any idea how to work that thing?"

"No. Why should I? I'm not the electronics expert."

"You were in here with Yen Sa while he used it. Didn't you maybe see what some of the buttons did?" Cai Yue said.

"I was playing with the map thing." Lian shook his finger in its direction.

"He let you play with the map thing?" The priest's voice expressed his shock.

"I know how to work the map thing!" Lian defended, not caring whether he sounded insulted or surly, not really sure himself which he was.

"But not the tracking thing? Shouldn't they be similar?" asked Captain Lan.

"Tracking thing: inventions by Yen Sa," Lian said, holding both arms in the direction of the chipped panel. "Translation: confusing, and rather shabbily constructed." He turned in the direction of the holographic display. "Map thing: highly advanced tool taken from pirates. Translation: Lian-proof and Lian-friendly."

"Translation: any idiot could use it," said Captain Lan.

"Except of course our good friend the captain," Lian returned, "who everyone knows isn't bright enough to be considered just any idiot."

"Whom everyone knows, idiot," Captain Lan said, pronouncing the last word with a raise of his chin and excessive articulation.

"You want to take this outside, petulant dolt?"

"Oh, I cower in fear of your almighty vocabulary."

"Does it not bother you two," interrupted Vendetta, accompanied by a slight raise in the temperature of the room to match his rising temper, "that we're about to be attacked by who-knows-how-many people with superior weaponry and you're arguing like eight-year-olds?"

"We need to set up the room to our advantage," said Tempest. "So we're not easy targets for them when they come. Rather, so they're easy targets for us."

"Ambush or be ambushed," said Rah Cai Yue.

But the room didn't offer much opportunity for hiding; Lian didn't have to be a ninja to recognize that. It was open and square, doors on either side of the room, a single table, and a really high ceiling. In fact, it was the ceiling that offered the only hope of any sort of hiding. The rafters crisscrossed all the way up, kind of like an obstacle course. They were spread just far enough apart, with enough of a gap in height, and narrow enough, that Lian grinned, thinking about running across them and leaping to the next, all the way up to the windows on the roofâ€"

"Considering our weapons are short range," said Tempest, seeing the direction of Lian's focus, "not long distance, climbing up in the rafters isn't going to help us much."

"So don't bother us with your suggestion, all right?" finished Captain Lan.

"I wasn't going to suggest it," Lian said quickly.

"Yes, you were," scoffed Captain Lan.

"No, I wasn't."

"You were staring up there with that longing look in your eyesâ€" "

"I was admiring the craftsmanshipâ€" "

"Of this dump?"

"Shut up!" yelled Vendetta. "They're probably standing outside the door laughing at you at this very moment."

"Well, then, they're not prepared for an attack, now are they?" said Lian.

"For some reason," spat Vendetta, "I doubt your arguing is going to serve as a very good defense."

"Lieutenant," said Tempest. "Try to find a place up there that's suitable. I trust your judgment." The sniper nodded, stepping on the table to leap up and grab the lowest rafter. "Everyone else, against the wall on either side of this door. Try to get them as they come in."

"Not to sound insubordinate, or anything," said Lian, "because, well, I leave that toâ€" " He stopped when the temperature began to rise again at Vendetta's glare. "Anyway, what about the door over there, where, if they come in, we make really nice targets. Doesn't the outer hallway surround this entire room, so couldn't they just as easily get to that door?"

"We'll just have to hope they don't come in that way," said Tempest.

"That's reassuring," Lian muttered. "I've always wanted to be fried in a mill, you know."

"Vyrenchi!" Rah Cai Yue suddenly shouted. "Where are they?"

"Good question," said Captain Lan. "Be nice to have our shields."

"Lian?" asked Vendetta.

"I thought Yen Sa was going to get them," Lian said. "He's the one who's all friendly with the energy and stuff."

"You sent Yen Sa to get everyone?" Tempest said.

"He just kind of ran off. Without telling me anything, I might add."

"So we're shieldless sitting ducks," said Captain Lan. "Sounds like my kind of battle."

"I really hope you're being sarcastic," said Rah Cai Yue.

Captain Lan started to reply, an answer that Lian thought began rather like 'not really', but with a short, startled yell and a thud, Nai Do Xian hit the floor in the middle of the room.

"Lieutenant!" shouted Tempest.

"You all right?" asked Rah Cai Yue, leaving the wall to help him up.

The lieutenant groaned and rolled over, and accepted the priest's outstretched hand. "Yeah, I'm okay." Then he inhaled a loud hiss and winced. "No. Arm," he managed.

"Yeah, I heard the crack all the way over here," said Lian.

"Come on," said Cai Yue. "Let's get out of the way."

"Except there really is no out of the way in here," said Captain Lan.

"Don't worry about me," said Nai Do Xian. "Just turn over the table, and I can still shoot. I think."

As Lian moved Yen Sa's equipment to the floor and dragged the table to the corner, Cai Yue said lightly, "If I'd known you were going to fall, I could have made a gravity well to catch you."

"Yeah, I'll try to remember to warn you next time." The lieutenant's voice was pained, but he smiled.

"What happened? Cracked beam?" said Tempest.

"Momentary suspension of coordination?" said Lian. "It happens, you know."

"No, I was already in position. Pretty secure," said Nai Do Xian, sitting below the table, and laying his crossbow on the floor. "Then it felt like I was pushed. And I fell."

"Someone pushed you?" demanded Vendetta. "They're already here?"

"No, no one actually was there. It was like some invisible force. Not even like a gust of wind or anything. I was just moved."

"So they are here," said Cai Yue. "Or something is, at least."

"Maybe it's ghosts," said Lian. "This place does look rather haunted, you must admit, with the cobwebs and the creaky woodâ€"."

"Lian, please try to stay realistic while our lives are in danger," said Tempest.

* * *

><p>The poison had traveled quickly, entirely numbing the girl's arm and dangerously close to rendering the muscles that controlled her respiration inactive by the time Zhen had begun to try to heal her. And then it had taken him a little too long to completely identify the not-belonging organic molecules interspersed in all her belonging organic molecules. He'd had trouble in the beginning, tracking each molecule and beginning to pull it away from her lungs and back to her burn on her arm, where he could extract it through the broken skin

and blood vessels.<p>

Maybe he was still having trouble narrowing in on the molecules, but it was getting a mite easier each time, and he had collected a huge swarm of the malicious little pests that he was pulling a bit closer to the burn with every molecule collected. It was a lot like raking leaves. This yokel girlfriend of yokel boy probably had a lot more experience than he did in that matter. Or maybe they just let them blow around and be pesky in yokel-land.

She shuddered again and he jumped again and struggled to keep his concentration, sending his psyche out to frantically make sure he hadn't missed anything. He knew they'd let her get a little too close to the point-of-no-return condition in their attempt to minimize the yokel's hysteria before they started, and accordingly, every gasp and pained twitch the girl made sent him into a short flight of panic. As it was, he already had doubts for her arm.

If she died on him, the poor kid would never forgive him.

* * *

><p>The dry air stung her lungs as they ran, and she fully understood Yen Sa's earlier pants, if not his agitation. After all, he didn't have the psychic powers to feel the possible danger that Kei Sa did. All he had known was that they had twelve to twenty-four attackers, probably just normal attackers, whom they'd beaten with quite a lot of ease in the past. After all, their laser weapons were worthless againstâ€"<p>

The Vyrenchi were protecting the ships. Which was why Ming was not worried about the civilians, or Kei Sa, Hseh An, and Zhen. Which was why she should be frightened for the rest of the honor guardâ€"shieldless.

"Vyrenchi!" she cried.

Her husband was opening the door to the mill, and halted momentarily to say, "What?", the door half-open.

A laser bolt came from the hallway beyond the door and caught him in the chest. He fell back and Tieh Chen Yi slammed the door shut, another bolt splintering the wood.

"Wei Yong!" Ming gasped, and Hua Quy Ling pulled her away from the door, away from the weakened wood.

"I'm fine," he said, pale and looking surprised of the fact himself.

=We caught it. No harm was done.=

"Honor?" said Ming.

=Yes, Yuen Ming. It is us. We are here.=

"It would have been nice of you to let us know that as we were running into combat."

=We are sorry, Yuen Ming.=

"Are you the only one here?" asked Yen Sa.

=Yes, we are.=

"I think we all need a Vyrenchi to shield us, Honor," said Wei Yong.
"It's kind of nice not to be fried."

=One moment.=

Less than that, realized Ming, as they all gasped slightly at the feeling of Vyrenchi energy merging with their bodies.

"Are we ready?" asked Hua Quy Ling.

"Couldn't be readier," said Wei Yong.

"Neither could they, I imagine," Chen Yi said.

"Yes, but they don't know quite how ready we are," answered Wei Yong.

"And I think it's probably a good thing we don't have Captain Lan here to get such enjoyment out of the looks on their faces when they find out," said Yen Sa, taking a deep gulp of air as he held up his right hand and activated his life-force sword.

In the moment she saw the luminous blade materialize, Ming understood Yen Sa's erratic behavior. It wasn't panic--not entirely anyway. He was nervous. This was his field test.

"Let's go," said Wei Yong, drawing his sword and reaching toward the door handle again.

* * *

><p>Cai Yue wasn't ashamed that he flinched when the first bolt made it through the now-shattered door. The only protection against their attacker's weapon in the entire room was the table that only the lieutenant and one other small person, like perhaps Ming, but no one who was actually in the room, could fit behind. And judging from the speed with which the door was wasted, the table probably wouldn't hold up too long.

And Cai Yue wasn't ashamed that he gasped and sank to the floor in relief when the bolts were seemingly absorbed just feet in front of them.

When had the Vyrenchi come, and why did they have to be so alien and not understanding that when they couldn't be seen, they had to orally--mentally--announce their presence?

The onslaught only lasted a few seconds before the attackers seemed to be distracted by something in the hall, but he didn't doubt he was as pale as everyone else when it ended.

* * *

><p>In a small room of a ship nested in a canyon, a newborn girl wailed her first breath.<p>

* * *

><p>The attackers, human and dressed in dark, multi-pocketed uniforms, turned their weapons away from the doorway into the mill's central room almost immediately when the honor guard members entered the hall. Ming flinched under the first several bolts, but the energy merely tickled as Honor absorbed it, and she followed the others in their reckless sprint down the hall and into the clump of attackers.</p>

Unlike the larger men, she didn't run full-force into an attacker and knock him over--she probably wouldn't have--instead opting to reduce her run to a slide that ended with one end of her double-bladed staff bisecting one of the attacker's heart. She pulled it out and jammed the other end of the spear to her side, into another attacker's stomach, which she cleanly sliced open as she removed the staff.

She turned to see Yen Sa's energy blade swing cleanly through an attacker's torso and the metal weapon that he had begun to lower.

And the last attacker hit the floor dead.

"That was easy," said Tieh Chen Yi with a shrug.

But instead of the giddy smile Ming expected to see on Yen Sa's face, an appropriate expression to fit the irrefutable truth that his invention worked exceptionally well, she saw a troubled frown as he looked around at all the bodies on the floor.

"Problem," he said. "Only eleven people dead here."

"You were hoping for a total massacre?" asked Wei Yong.

He looked up and shook his head. "As a general rule, eleven people can't fly twelve ships."

28. VI

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah</p>

VI.

* * *

><p>Zhen opened his eyes and watched the yellow-green syrup ooze from the girl's burn and gather into a little sphere hardly larger than a pearl. He had been hoping that for all his hard work he'd get to see something a little more rewarding at the end. It was such a bother that everything had to be constructed of such tiny molecules, and that the little pests had to be dealt with individually.</p>

He just knew they were taunting him with their happy, sadistic frolicking, all bouncing off each other like they were having a little party. At least it wasn't a gaseous poison--those were enough to make him almost lose his mind.

He dropped the poison in a little glass and glared at it, thinking perhaps he'd methodically rip apart each and every one of the molecules, then realized perhaps even just this liquid poison was making him lose his mind.

Of course, the only other thing to look at in the room was the girl, and having so thoroughly explored her arm, looking at her wasn't doing him much good, either.

He frowned and walked to the door, leaning out and looking both ways down the hall.

Where had everyone gone? He hoped it hadn't been days. He'd worked for days before on a doomed case and when the patient had finally died he'd only succeeded in twisting his ankle when his legs gave out from underneath him from weakness on the way home because no one had bothered to tell him that it had been days or given him any food.

The girl moaned and when he looked back at her, her eyelids fluttered for a few seconds and opened.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"I can't move my arm," she said, then she looked around and abruptly tried to sit up. He pushed her back down.

"No, no," he said quietly. "You've been very sick."

"No, no!" she echoed, her words frantic. "Where's Chen Yi?"

* * *

><p>Lian stepped away from the wall, shaking his head in disbelief and staring at the splinters that had once been a doorway. "The others are out there," he said. "Guess we should go. See if they need any help, and responsible stuff like that."

He began to walk in the direction of the door, but something closed around his throat and threw him back against the wall, his feet dangling. Before the others could shout a word of surprise, a man dropped to the floor where Nai Do Xian had fallen earlier, landing easily on his feet. He set his arms in front of him in a battle stance as a beam of light entirely too similar to that created by Yen Sa's life-force sword extended from the cylinder the man held.

Lian gagged, trying to breathe, and hoped he wasn't turning as blue as the man's blade.

Lan Yiao Nih cried something unintelligible but intimidating and jumped away from the wall, bringing his long, fat daggers into an attacking position.

The man with the light sword turned and caught the attack with a slash that soared through both of the captain's daggers and grazed his stomach. Clutching his wound, Lan Yiao Nih tumbled to the floor with all four pieces of his daggers.

The light sword was aimed for the kill, but a burst of fire pushed

the man away and set his brown robe ablaze; Vendetta stood a step from the wall with his hands raised and prepared to unleash another blast.

The man quelled the fire without any apparent effort—it faded to a glimmer and died without external influence. He didn't seem singed or affected in any way, raising the glowing blue blade for another attack.

The last thing Lian saw as the black closed on his vision was a blade of glaring white meeting the softer blue in an eruption of sparks.

It was almost like a light show.

He guessed he'd miss those.

* * *

><p>He could have laid there, in the cool, slightly murky pools for days. Maybe he had been—after all time always passed more quickly when he wasn't unhappy.</p>

No, he'd be hungry if he hadn't eaten in days.

Although he was rather hungry. They probably had good fish. And none of those ridiculous green vegetables that humans insisted were the very essence of nutrition.

He should probably eat.

Later. The water felt so good across his gills—cool and smooth.

He heard footsteps—hard soles on the shoes, but probably moderately expensive.

Most Calyaar weren't too fond of shoes, but he supposed there were exceptions. The labored breathing in the humidity confirmed the arrival as non-Calyaar, and he listened for sounds of trouble, heard none, and wondered when any other species had begun to consider itself low enough to interact with Calyaar. Maybe Hutts, but they didn't walk, just kind of slithered. And who would have let a Hutt in, anyway? They may have been 'pond scum', but they had their principles.

The non-Calyaar visitor stopped a few steps from the pool and spoke. "Is there someone named Rictor Escard-Jerill here?"

Male. Human. That was an interesting development. And the name was certainly not a Calyaar. Some ignorant human was a little lost.

Then realization hit and Braeden breathed deeply, wanting to savor the feeling of cool water one last time before he had to revert to his secondary respiratory system. The message had to be urgent if Tascilo had risked sending one of his aides to deal directly with Braeden, even if under a false name bred from acronym.

But he didn't move, instead lingering on the thought that if the message were so important, it would be unbelievable fun to pretend he didn't exist and send Tascilo into a fit of panic, even if he

couldn't be there to witness it.

No, something was wrong in the galaxy and it had begun to bother Braeden like an itch in the back of his throatâ€"impossible to ignore, impossible to get rid of.

But foil the almighty human general's plans?

He exhaled bubbles from his secondary respiratory system as he climbed out of the pool. "That would be me," he said. "Rictor Escard-Jerill."

The aide handed him a datapad. "Here, sir," he said, then left, in a hurry, which Braeden almost didn't notice, reflecting on the 'sir'.

Military type. It was automatic. He dismissed the unusual gesture and flicked on the datapad. It prompted him for a password.

He clicked his tongue and tapped his dripping bare foot in a puddle for a few seconds.

He typed Committee.

The pad beepedâ€"despicable soundâ€"and replied, Incorrect password, then prompted him again.

Radical.

Incorrect.

Pond scum. He hoped Tascilo hadn't dared.

Incorrect.

Braeden fought the urge to throw the datapad against the wall and kick it a few times. Their efforts to be cleverer than the other were only going to end in them being so clever they were completely incomprehensible.

What had he called himself last time he'd spoken to Tascilo?

Mimic-sprite. Could he have gotten any more obscure?

The password prompt faded and the message appeared.

Trouble with the Ms. Attacked on the rimâ€"not pirates, not misunderstanding. Republic fighters. Everything's in a fuss here. Squadron still missing. Typical pilots of those ships still missing. Scandal. Thought it'd lift your spirits...

Braeden grinned, typed a reply, and sent it immediately over the unsecured public frequencies.

Trouble with the Ms.? Thought you were married, therefore wouldn't it be Mrs.? Mistress? Scandal! And THAT would lift my spirits._

The troubled thoughts about the Mandalorians came only after sufficient trouble making.

* * *

><p>Yen Sa felt the warm sparks sting as they sprayed across him. He dropped his life-force sword to block a two-handed swing at his knees by his opponent, the twelfth attacker.</p>

The blades hissed together again, rejecting each other as firmly as tangible metal. The man with the blue sword stepped forward, continuing his offense with a series of small thrusts, which Yen Sa parried without much effort. The man fought in an unfamiliar style, one that seemed to lack the ferocity in movement of the styles the Mandalorians used. It was too civilized to be brutally effective, too predictable, with only a small array of attacks in use, to be any threat.

In a test, Yen Sa blocked a swing in the opposite direction as expected, pushing it too far in the direction it had been traveling and snapping his leg in a round kick into the now-exposed flesh of the side.

The man stumbled to the side but recovered quickly, as Yen Sa felt an invisible force wrap itself around his neck and begin to tighten. The man swung his sword in a middle blow again. Yen Sa held in the breath he had, hoping it would be enough, and ducked the blade with a low spinning attack aimed to cut off the man's feet. He jumped over the attackâ€"jumping too high with too much ease to be entirely normalâ€"and kept his sword in a blocking position in the front.

Yen Sa rolled under the man's feet as he jumped, and when he landed, he impaled himself on Yen Sa's white blade. The man fell with a gurgle and the pressure on Yen Sa's neck disappeared immediately.

Yen Sa let the white blade dissipate and rolled the man onto his back, seeing the smoking hole through his heart. "That was easy," he remarked.

"That was amazing," said the queen.

"No, that is amazing," said Lan Yiao Nih, still lying on his back, but taking one of his hands from his wound to point at the device on Yen Sa's hand. "I want."

"How are you?" asked the queen, kneeling beside him. "Is it bad?"

"I'm not bleeding," Captain Lan said. "My poor daggers."

"He's not bleeding either," Rah Cai Yue remarked, nudging the dead man with his toe.

"The heat cauterized the wound," said Vendetta. "It's worse than you think."

"What about Lian?" asked Tieh Chen Yi, pointing to the sprawled body on the floor.

"Oh," said Rah Cai Yue. "I think he's been livelier before." He took two steps forward then cringed. "Bad choice of adjective."

"He's still breathing," said the general, "so your description is only bad, not really bad."

"I didn't think. Honest."

"He'll be fine," said Tempest. "He's already waking up."

Lian kicked a leg out straight in a spasm, then managed to roll himself onto his back. He opened his eyes and blinked them several times as he looked around.

"Am I dead?"

"Yes, and I'm the Angel of Death," said Rah Cai Yue.

"I always knew there was something odd about you," said Lian. "So is this heaven? Because I never really connected all of you with happiness and paradise. Nothing personal."

"What makes you think you deserve heaven?" asked Lan Yiao Nih.

"Oh, I know that voice," said Lian. "What did I do that was so terrible, Cai Yue? Why am I in hell?"

"Get up," said the general, offering his hand.

Lian took it and pulled himself up. "Oh, light-headed," he said, leaning over and covering his eyes with his hand. "I always hated it when the black stuff surrounded my vision before; now, it's like reliving death."

"You're not dead. Get over it," said Lan Yiao Nih.

"I see you're, unfortunately, not either," answered Lian. "It seems you've come awful close, though. Maybe you'll get infected!" he finished brightly.

"Somebody pick him up," said the general, waving his hand in the direction of Lan Yiao Nih. "Let's go."

* * *

><p>Rah Cai Yue watched the other ships take off from the viewport of the Templar's bridge, standing not far from Nai Do Xian, who was waiting for the others to clear the canyon before piloting the queen's ship off the planet. They'd left planets in fear numerous times since their arrival in the strange galaxy, but this time was more than just another repeat.

This time they left in war. Against whom, they didn't know. To what extent they would have to fight, they didn't know. They only knew that they couldn't tolerate the aggression any longer, and that something was wrong with this galaxy—something involving clones and someone powerful that they could not allow to continue.

He didn't suppose they'd ever go home. It wasn't that he was a pessimist, just a realist. Maybe he'd been an optimist in years past, but life had taught him that things didn't always have a storybook ending—the outnumbered protagonist didn't always defeat the evil

just because he was the protagonist. Neither did he always go down in a burst of glory that tore the hearts of feeling people everywhere.

Reality dictated what happened to people, and reality said that a small group of people disliked by everyone would find themselves being attacked by everyone if they attacked even just the one.

He wondered how Kei Sa couldn't feel the impending failure and destruction. He wasn't psychic and he could feel it. Perhaps her baby was distracting her from the dire plight they were creating. A baby girl, named Hua Ching Sa and collectively adored. Red and crying. Maybe it was better that he wasn't married; he didn't see the appeal of infants.

He felt bad for Hseh An, who he was sure would be marrying Tieh Chen Yi some day, even if neither of them realized it yet. She felt better every hour, but she was still weak, her arm still viciously burned, and she was still unable to move it.

Probably it was better that she didn't know that Zhen didn't think she ever would again.

Zhen was returning to his senses, after they had found him acting bizarrely and speaking almost unintelligibly of strange things such as swarming little yellowy-green fiends and the ritualistic slaughter of molecules. Lianâ€"also feeling betterâ€"had explained that poison-cleansing did that to him, comparing it to mixing a handful of black sand in a tub of white sand and then separating out all the black sand grains one by one, by hand. It drove him a little crazy; he'd be better after he slept; make sure he ate something.

Was Ming out of her mind, too? Was there something so terrible in just admitting they were out of their league but had accomplished their original goal, and then leaving? So they had found a way to protect their ships indefinitely. So even the weapons of the galaxy were no longer undefeatable, the honor guard with their Vyrenchi shields and the devices Yen Sa was making them all, and even the normal troops with their confiscated laser guns and heavy armor. So Kei Sa was able to fight again.

A different power lurked in this galaxy. Something called the Jedi, that wore brown robes, frowned a lot, used light swords, and were able to push people off rafters, hold them off the ground, and choke them without any sort of physical contact, and consisted of undoubtedly large numbers. They could argue with him that they didn't have proof the man Yen Sa had fought was a Jedi, that he could have been a fluke, like Kei Sa.

Call him a pessimist or call him a realist, he doubted this galaxy had flukes. It was too scientifically advanced, too scientifically structured.

And much too large.

29. Part 5: Confrontation, I

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

Part 5:

>Confrontation
>Twenty-Two Years Before MK1<p>

I.

* * *

><p>An arrow split the wood of a sapling not three inches from his left ear, and Ta Lian Shi chuckled. Finally, the attackers were getting smart, experimenting with regressing from their advanced weapons to those that couldn't be stopped by Vyrenchi shields. If the aim of the few who were using non-energy weapons improved, even the honor guard would have to begin wearing the heavy armor worn by the unshielded Mandalorian troops.<p>

Lian let his energy blades dissipate—sadly, he could not bend them into the slight S shape of his metal weapons without exhausting himself—and wrenched the arrow from the tree. The craftsmanship of the head and the balance of the entire thing were shoddy: these attackers obviously were not applying themselves. The lieutenant would have been ashamed to let such an imminent failure fly.

Lian turned to the rock perch from which the arrow had originated, hoping to use the arrow against the archer. He saw the uniformed human scrambling for his energy gun, perhaps realizing he was wasting his time, or more likely, based upon his desperation, out of arrows. Lian sighed as the man was killed by a bolt from a Mandalorian soldier's stolen weapon. He almost threw the arrow on the ground and stomped on it a few times in a proper fit, impervious as he was, but a lime-skinned humanoid, equipped with the standard energy weapon, came running, screaming unnecessarily shrilly, up the hill to Lian's vantage point. The attacker's wild shots vanished a few particles before Lian's black shirt began, but even the ill-made arrowhead easily punctured a throat. He leapt onto a boulder, his ego suited to being the highest sentient in sight, and let a rush of water wash away a line of attackers, crush them into a rock formation, and explode into the sky before re-evaporating.

Lian the Warlord, said his ego. He began to grin, but scowled as he saw Captain Lan Yiao Nih create a vacuum in the atmosphere to kill a group of attackers. Lan would have killed for such a title. Well, granted that was somewhat necessary considering the title, but Lan would have killed needlessly.

Lian the simple warrior, he corrected, and dived off the boulder. He somersaulted as he hit the ground, then jumped to his feet, surrounded by a group of attackers, and activated his light weapons. The men had no defense except to fire wildly in panic, and he killed them quickly in an admittedly wild flurry of movement.

Lian the not-so-simple warrior, he corrected again, and allowed himself the grin. He leapt forward to continue his work—

—And everyone around him died without a sound, twitch, or expression of any kind—no pain, no shock. Nothing.

He stopped so suddenly he almost fell over backward when he over-compensated to avoid falling forward, flailing his arms for

balance before instinctively throwing them up to block his head from the unseen attacker. His light blades passed into his flesh, slightly warming it as his life force was sucked back into him.

He lowered his arms and saw Kei Sa open her eyes.

* * *

><p>Rah Cai Yue squinted at a flying object in the distance, turned, and ran. Behind him, his attacker, heartened by his sudden flight, gave chase; Cai Yue could feel the warmth on his back of energy bolts absorbed by his Vyrenchi guard.</p>

Surely, they hadn't "not arrows. Not when they were so attached to advanced weaponry. Not when that would mean armor, and he hated armor.

Having moved far enough to see around the rock the archer was hiding behind, Cai Yue halted and turned his torso half around, stretching out one hand. The attackers who had been chasing him were wrenched into a huddle, pulled mercilessly to the middle. He turned his head back toward the archer, watching anxiously as he readied another arrow. Then he saw the littering of arrows in the area, stuck in the ground like javelins after a throwing contest, but never stuck in anything but ground. The archer couldn't hit a tree--well, actually he did then, and a small one at that, which would have been quite the accomplishment for him if he hadn't been aiming for Lian's head.

Cai Yue turned completely, renewed the energy for his sword, and killed the men he'd trapped with gravity. It was shameless slaughter, but all battles were, especially in this galaxy--or section of galaxy, or whatever it was. They were still won by the luckiest and most numerous, but they lacked the one consolation he had counted on in the battles of Mandalore and its surrounding planets. It was unskilled slaughter, sans honor, not a personal battle in which skill actually mattered. He understood the Art of War was nothing more than learning to kill the most efficiently, but that didn't mean he had to respect it. This place had been slaughter since they arrived, but at least now it was double-sided slaughter, Mandalorians and their attackers falling to identical weapons. That was fair. The honor guard and the Jedi were not.

Which was why he had hoped the archer was a Jedi. But no Jedi would have missed. Had he fired the arrow straight up into the sky, a Jedi would not have missed.

The archer fell to a normal Mandalorian trooper, and Cai Yue turned his attention back to the battle as a whole, then selected a group of men who were advancing on a group of overwhelmed Mandalorians. They were the war gods, the honor guard and the Jedi. They were outside the battle, almost, looking on to help the mortals with transcendent power.

He dragged the men to the ground, pinning them helplessly incapable of twitching even a finger (firing their weapons) or blinking dust out of their eyes. Beside his group, another fell. He glanced to them, shocked by the nothing that had caused their deaths. It was the nothing that Kei Sa created out of their minds, and he couldn't help staring at her.

The men he'd been about to kill stumbled to their feet, his hold on them broken, and were shot down by Mandalorian troops.

And Cai Yue was glad he stared, because in the distance behind Kei Sa's head, he saw a distinctive green blade—"non-Mandalorian.

He leapt over some corpses and ran over others.

* * *

><p>Crouched behind a boulder on the edge of the battle nearest Mandalorian base camp, Lieutenant Nai Do Xian readjusted his grip on his weapon. All his enemies were in his view, and he carefully aimed and killed any who managed to make it past the last line of Mandalorian defenders. The frequency of this occurring had increased as the battle progressed, but the size of the threats steadily decreased. The Mandalorians were winning again. The soldiers killed their share of attackers, but it was really the honor guard who enabled the Mandalorian victory, felling attackers by the dozens. Only the queen and Yen Sa were unable to incapacitate large groups at once. Do Xian could use his element—"earth"—efficiently enough, but he was of more use as a sniper. Yen Sa was watching his back. The queen was in the forest somewhere causing any attackers who wandered in after her to be impaled by tree branches, tied in place by the foliage, or strangled with the rare vine.</p>

"There's something on the right," Yen Sa said, "past the edge of the battle."

"My right or yours?" he replied, firing three shots with an energy weapon and killing three humans.

"Your left. A green light blade—"who has green?"

"The queen."

"Not long enough, or the right shape. Or the right shade of green for that matter. Hers is darker."

"Zhen."

"Could be." For a few moments, Yen Sa was quiet—"not silent, for Do Xian could hear the boy's boots scuffle on the rocks when he shifted position. He was much too fidgety to be any good at stealth.

"Now there's a blue one," he said, shifting again. "They're closer."

"Lian."

"Could be. That would make sense."

Another charge—"only three again"—came up the hill, and Do Xian shot them.

"They're gone!" Yen Sa yelled as Do Xian's last blast rang in his ears. "They were getting really close, but then they just disappeared."

"Probably went back to the battle. I don't know why they were

wandering around back there anyway." He fired twice more--one missed. He glanced up in annoyance, then fired again, just as he felt the shift in energy and saw the extra white flicker of light as Yen Sa activated his sword.

He turned away from his scouting point to see a green blade and a blue blade appear in the trees just behind them. A man held one; a gray-skinned alien of mostly human proportions held the other. Both wore brown robes and looked serene and assured as they stepped into the open.

Yen Sa stood and tilted his blade into ready position. The Jedi adjusted their postures and flew into the air only to slam to a stop, splayed out like they had hit a ceiling.

Do Xian blinked twice in surprise as the Jedi's weapons hit the rocks and rolled, and Rah Cai Yue jumped over his still-crouched body to land with his dark indigo blade already blazing. He swung it up toward the human Jedi, but the man's blade jumped off the ground and ignited with a hiss to block Cai Yue's attack.

Do Xian saw the other Jedi's weapon do the same thing to persistently block Yen Sa's attacks, as a cloud of dust flew into Yen Sa's face and continued past his body toward Do Xian. He raised his arm and shielded his eyes. Then he heard three thumps, and lowered his arm to see that the two Jedi had fallen out of Cai Yue's grip, and that Cai Yue was reeling. A large rock changed direction to fly toward Cai Yue's head--again? He cut it into six less dangerous pieces and stepped backward to parry the attack of the Jedi, who was now holding his weapon.

The other Jedi was only just rising, having fallen hard. Yen Sa, his eyesight apparently still suffering, let out a broadly aimed flash of light that left large spots on Do Xian's vision and presumably blinded the gray-skinned alien. When Do Xian's vision cleared, all four light blades were gone, and the two Jedi were dead.

Yen Sa shrugged and rubbed at his eyes. "These Jedi really aren't that bad."

"No, I guess not," Cai Yue said, "but what were they doing back here? I mean, usually they're out in the thick of it, doing to our men what we do to theirs. And it's generally a good show, what with all the bolt deflections and telekinesis."

"Maybe they were trying to stop the lieutenant. He does manage to make a pretty big instant-kill zone."

"Thank you," Do Xian said, standing up to lean against the boulder--their attackers had retreated while Cai Yue and Yen Sa fought the Jedi.

"I could have come up with a much better way to stop him than skulking through the trees," said Cai Yue. "Besides, he doesn't take out any more of them than the rest of us do." He glanced to Do Xian. "No offense."

Do Xian shrugged.

"Except for me," said Yen Sa.

Cai Yue nodded once. "Except for you. Soâ€" "

"And the queen," said Do Xian.

"And Ming," Cai Yue said a trifle impatiently. "So why notâ€" "

"And I was watching you," said Yen Sa, "and I think he probably killed more people than you did this battle."

"So why not go after one of us out there, who's more vulnerable?" Cai Yue stopped for a moment, waiting for an interruption. Seeing Do Xian's position, he frowned slightly. "Why are youâ€" " He looked to the battlefield. "Where did everyone go?"

"They retreated while you were fighting," Do Xian said. "There weren't many left when you came over here. Surely you noticed."

"No, there were a lot." Cai Yue folded his arms. "They were just all dead." Do Xian almost expected him to stick out his tongue. "So, they didn't wait until these guys were dead before they left?"

"I don't think they even knew they wereâ€" "

"Do you think they were after the queen?" Yen Sa said quickly. "She was in the woods; they were in the woods."

"Ming? You don't suppose they found her, do you?" Cai Yue looked to the woods with panicky little breaths. "She's all right, don't you think? I think we had better make sure."

"Cai Yue," Yen Sa said sharply, pointing to the middle of the field. "She's right there."

"Oh, good." Cai Yue's breathing relaxed. "We'd better tell her, then. About the Jedi." He scrambled over the boulder.

Do Xian gave Yen Sa a questioning look.

"They were...close," Yen Sa explained. "Growing up, I mean."

"I guess so."

* * *

><p>Braeden Leer smiled politely, lips unparted, at the woman on the other side of the counter and kept his eyes open to avoid offending her. It wasn't that she was particularly interesting; she said nothing he didn't already know, and she said nothing in a unique manner. She wasn't even somebody of importanceâ€"diplomat, officer, crime lordâ€"for whom he had to feign respect. She was just a merchant, selling him a crystal, and chattering about her wares. But he was enjoying her speech if not her conversation and didn't want her to stop. She had a lovely voice made more appealing by her accent, with which he was unfamiliar. Her consonants were short and precise, enunciated at the front of her mouth without the laziness or throatiness common to Coruscant's citizens. Her vowels were similarly precise and distinct, which also marked her as someone who hadn't been on Coruscant long. His own language hardly bothered with vowels, the one it did have only a means of getting from one consonant to the

next. Hers were long enough to remind him of the Mandalorians. While they'd had many, some of them distinguished by the smallest inflections, she had only sixâ€"stilting her Basic considerablyâ€"but all six uncommonly pure.<p>

He should have gotten himself off Coruscant months ago, but he'd managed to get entangled in an 'information retrieval' scheme of General Tascilo's. Eavesdropping and playing with the general's mind were two of his favorite occupationsâ€"the only two not tarnished by his 'dishonorable discharge', as Tascilo would sayâ€"and not opportunities he could pass up.

The entire Republic was factioned on how to deal with the Mandalorians who dared to take their worlds (despite the fact that they kept only one at a time) and challenge their military might (despite the fact that the Mandalorians almost never initiated a battle). In typical, infuriating Tascilo fashion, the general had refused to ally himself with any, instead doing his best to know what everyone was doing and inflict the military equivalent of a filibuster on any plan he did not like. It would be interesting if it involved assassinations and covert operations rather than inexplicable lockdowns on different forms of transportation, impassable security, and sudden lacks of available troops or weapons.

Tascilo was a powerful man, and, for him, remaining undecided had perks beyond the great freedom of merely being undecided. At least a quarter of the Republic's officers were solely loyal to him, and would follow his orders even if they conflicted with those of the Supreme Chancellor and the Senate. He was courted by all factions, and even without Braeden's help, he knew more about what everyone was doing than anyone else, except perhaps Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, who was behaving decidedly Tascilo-like, if more diplomatic, and generally pleasing everyone except Braeden Leer.

Really, peopleâ€"especially important peopleâ€"ought to pick a side and stand their ground.

At least the Jedi were, and he could respect that even if he didn't agree with their position. One would think the Mandalorians had lined up and one by one spit on Yoda's face by how determined the Jedi were to defeat them. They were mostly interested in the powerful onesâ€"super-commandoes, as the few who had seen their skills and lived had dubbed them. They wanted to capture one and find out where this power came from; they wanted the secret of their shields; and they wanted to know why each of their lightsaber-like weapons did not harm the 'supercommando' brandishing it; but mostly, the Jedi wanted them dead. Braeden couldn't entirely blame them for it: it had to be tough on such narrow-minded fools to be challenged by a power they could neither defeat nor explain.

At least they were distracted, which meant they weren't on the lookout for him.

The merchant girl dropped the crystal on the counterâ€"he didn't hear the clatter he knew it madeâ€"and let out a squeak that he did hear. He belatedly realized that he had been concentrating too closely on her and had unconsciously blocked out all sound but her voice. He abandoned all the audio filters in his brain and clicked his tongue at the din of the thousands milling behind him that re-entered his

awareness.

He heard two quick steps behind him of a heavyâ€"if humanâ€"someone. A dark red-gloved hand closed on the crystal.

"Excuse me, Braeden Leer. You are required by Republic Law to either acknowledge your identity or provide proof to the contrary when addressed by a palace guard." The voice was male and human, which had been happening more and more frequently since Palpatine took over. He was entirely clothed in the same red as his gloves.

"I didn't hear you the first time."

"That's a new one, Mr. Leer; I was standing right behind you. Come with me or I am authorized to arrest you, with force, if necessary."

He should have gotten himself off Coruscant months ago.

30. II

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

II.

* * *

><p>They were fighting again, immature bickering in front of everyone, and Zhen Feng Qui rather wondered if anyone else was at all alarmed by the apparent lack of reason in their two main leaders' arguments. Not that he was one to talk, but he didn't make the decisions. He put it down to the peculiarities of marriage and also rather wondered whose idea it had been to allow spouses to have to work together in such positions of authority. The queen and the general: cute in theory but nightmarish in fact.<p>

But mostly he wondered why the general even tried.

"No, we're going to keep this planet for a while yet," said the queen. "It's extremely easily defended, and it has all the resources we need."

The general had to chase her around the room to talk to her.

"Yes, but we've been attacked here three timesâ€" "

"And easily turned back our attackers three times."

She walked in a circle around the yokels, and he followed her every step. He had to be a man of great humilityâ€"the general, not Tieh Chen Yi. Or maybe that was just the effect of being married to the queen. The yokel boy just looked frightened that his yokel girlfriendâ€"her arm limply hanging in a sling with scarcely a chance of recovery at this pointâ€"would end up like the queen.

"Yes, but how do we know that they're not figuring out how to defeat us? The fourth attack could be the last."

The queen stopped and turned, hands on hips. The general almost ran into her. "You said that after the second fight. 'The third fight could be our doooom.' "

He had, although he hadn't used a silly tone of voice or a melodramatic word like 'doom'; Zhen remembered. The queen grew more childish as she grew more irritated every time they rehashed the same argument.

"Well..." The general faltered. "Bad things always come in threes."

"That they do," said Zhen.

The queen and the general both looked perplexed at his interruption.

"Just ask my mother," he added.

"Oh, and you say we Sapphire Coast citizens are superstitious?" said Chen Yi.

"I never said that."

Chen Yi opened his mouth to retort, but they were arguing again.

"You said it after the first time, too."

"Yes, butâ€"I mean it this time."

Ah, 'yes, but,' the language of love. Lian started every sentence with it when he tried to argue with Shenah. He'd heard Chen Yi say it to his girlfriend the day before. Poor kid was doooomed.

But not as doooomed as the general's argument.

"I am the queen, and I order you to accept my judgment on this matter."

"Well, I'm the general, and I know military strategy, and Iâ€" "

"Indignantly acquiesce?" Zhen offered.

When all a room's inhabitants turn on you as one with that sort of a look, it is always best to leave.

* * *

><p>Even if he had wanted to, Braeden couldn't have stopped smirking. The scene he stood in the middle of was far too enjoyable. They could recite their 'anger leads to the dark side blah blah blah' mantra as much as they wanted, but they couldn't stop from looking as though they were going to give in to it and pull him apart bit by bit until he died.<p>

Mace Windu was hunched forward with his forearms on his knees in some attempt to look less threatening (as though Braeden would ever be intimidated by him); he only came across as condescending. "Now,

Leer," he said.

"I prefer to be called _Yktv_ Leer," Braeden cut in. "When speaking to someone of another culture, it's only polite to use the proper title from his culture when you took away his title in yours."

Windu looked slightly thrown, as intended, and hesitated. "..._Yktv_ Leer, you do understand why we're upset about the hospitalization of seventeen palace guards and the minor wounding of six others."

Braeden rolled his eyes—"one of the many useful human gestures his people hadn't the visual acuity to develop—"and was rewarded with a tighter, louder tone in man's next words.

"Especially in light of the fact that you then chose to walk peacefully—"alone—"into the very room to which you were only being escorted."

"I have been here before. I do remember the way. And—"please—"don't try to tell me it was only an honorary escort. You have to be important for that, and generally, well, not excommunicated."

"_Yktv_ Leer," said Ki-Adi-Mundi, easily recognizable even in Braeden's poor vision because of his lumpy, conical head, "it is for the very skills which you have chosen unwisely to display today that we summoned you here."

"Now, if I remember correctly," Braeden said, deliberately scratching his temple, "it was my fighting that got me into trouble with all of you in the first place. Or at least—" he dropped his hand—"that was the reason you gave."

The senior council members didn't have the hearts to even look ashamed. The newer ones looked slightly confused—"they probably didn't even realize there was a political aspect to the Jedi Council yet.

"We understand how you may harbor resentments toward us due to your situation," Mundi replied, "but as you must have realized, there is a situation at hand that requires us to take some action beyond the normal procedures. You have heard of the Mandalorians?"

Braeden closed his eyes and slouched, and only the quiet wave of indignant motion he could hear kept his smirk from entirely fading.

Mace Windu took over, all patience again. "There are some Mandalorians that pose a particular threat that only we Jedi have a hope of defeating. Every Jedi we have sent up against them, however, has been killed. It has become clear to us that these Mandalorians possess not only unique powers, but also extraordinary fighting skills. Our only hope of defeating them may lie in sending a group of our best fighters to infiltrate their base. Despite lapses in judgment concerning your method, you are arguably one of the finest fighters the Jedi Order has ever—"

"Now this is where I have a problem." He heard almost every one of their breathings glitch in shock, and he shook his head. "No, not in

what he just said. You can't win that tournament as many times in a row as I did and not get called 'one of the finest Jedi fighters ever'. None of you would even bother to argue that. My problem is what is about to come out of Windu's mouth."

Saesee Tinn was the one to be least offended by his disrespect to Windu, and thus the first to speak, the Iktotch's voice by nature every bit as tight as his plentiful muscles. "You do not wish to fight the Mandalorians?"

"That is not the issue at hand. You cannot tell someone to leave forever and then drag him back to do your bidding when you get into a tough situation."

"Ah," said Yoda, "but you it was who came back."

"With all due respect, Master Yoda," Braeden said, and, for once, meant it. "Yoda was the only decent one among them." "I came back to Coruscant because it is the only place besides my home planet where my people gather. I trust you all remember I cannot go back there because of you."

"We thought you might not want to help us," Windu said, "so we've decided that if you prove trustworthy enough, you will be reinstated as Jedi."

Braeden clicked his tongue twice as his gills opened in shock. "Has it never occurred to any of you that maybe I don't want to be in your little order anymore?"

"You cannot expect to ever get the title 'Master' back," Windu continued, "which we may have been hasty to award you in the first place. Also, we will officially remove the restrictions on your person which you have so thoroughly ignored."

Braeden rubbed his hands on the side of his neck to try to rub moisture from the wrap on it into his now-irritated gills. "Do I get to be in charge?"

The half of the council that knew him best, except Yoda, sat up with shock. Ki-Adi-Mundi sputtered but was unable to speak.

Braeden crossed his arms and let a second pass, then said, "I meant the mission." And grinned.

Mundi inhaled deeply and sighed, then said, "It would be...unacceptable for us to put any of the Order under the command of one who has proven himself...dangerous to the ideologies of the Council."

"I won't take orders from any of them."

"I will be in charge of the mission," said Shaak Ti, the newest member of the council. Braeden remembered her from the last tournament he'd fought in. "her tall, pale horns connected with long, striped _leku_ and her bright red skin with large, pale ovals around her eyes made her appearance stick in his mind more easily than most others'. She was good. He beat her, of course, but she had been good."

"I trust," Shaak Ti continued, "that you will honor my suggestions if I honor yours."

"Do I get my lightsaber back?"

Mundi said, "There have been some unforeseen difficulties stemming from the design of your weapon and its similarity to the one used by a Sith Lord defeated some ten years ago by Masterâ€"then Padawanâ€"Kenobi."

"No lightsaber, no Braeden."

"We intend to give a normal oneâ€" "

"No. Mine. Or no deal."

"Very well, then," said Windu, "but we will not be held responsible for any assumptions or unpleasantries caused by your weapon."

"Well, congratulations, then. You've just hired yourself a shamefully cheap mercenary. How do you feel? Liberated? Relieved? Dirty? Ohâ€"and one favor. Could you assign a cash value to the title 'Jedi Knight' in case I decide to take a monetary payment for my services?" He smiled, all four sets of incisors deliberately exposed.

"Master Tinn," said Mace Windu, "could you please escort _Yktv_ Leer to the Calyaar district and make sure that he understands if he leaves it before the scheduled hour of his departure, he will spend the rest of that time incarcerated."

They'd have to catch him first.

* * *

><p>"My queen?" Yen Sa called across the Mandalorian headquarters main planning room. "We have problems."<p>

"Problems?" The queen looked worried, but irritated to be so. Her mood swings were continuing to become less severe as she matured, if only because opposite moods were now mixing into the same swing. Her emotions had always seemed overpowering and flighty to Tempest, but he was remarkably placid for a wind elementalâ€"the result of first terror, then guilt, and now, finally, age.

"What sort of problems?" continued the queen.

"Well, it seems our attackers last week didn't retreat so much as regroup. We're surrounded."

"How long until we have to defend ourselves?" the general said.

"Well, that's the thing. They're not moving. It'sâ€"they're camped, sir."

"Camped?" The general blinked, then slowly said, "We're under siege? How is it we just now know about this?"

Yen Sa answered in his defensive toneâ€"quicker and slightly whiny. "They're quite a ways out. They've been scrambling us. I just

brokeâ€" "

"Never mind," said the general, lifting a hand in a halting gesture. "Yen Sa, you stay here and study your...stuff. Quy, Chen Yi, Cai Yue: alert the people. Zhen, Lan, Vendetta: check on our supplies. We should have plenty now, but we need to know what to conserve. Tempest, Do Xian, Lian: go scout, several different places. Split up. We need lots of details. Don't get killed. Kei Sa, stay here and help us."

When Tempest didn't move, nobody noticed. Yen Sa was focused; Kei Sa's eyes were closed. The queen and the general were engrossed in standing and worrying.

Tempest knew, even without looking, that something was off. Siege tactics would never be forgotten, and that they were used was no surprise. But the execution was all wrong for this galaxy. With their technology, why not work on a large scale where they'd have the advantage? Why not use their technology to set up a barrier instead of manpower? They had to know the honor guard could demolish their forces without much trouble. Why take the chance that the Mandalorians had a lifetime of supplies instead of trying to destroy them? They should have been attacking.

Instead, they seemed to want only to discourage the Mandalorians from going outside. Poised to kill anyone who tried to leave? No, they knew about the Vyrenchi. They had to know they couldn't harm the Mandalorians; they had to have some physical way of keeping them indoors. But then why gather? To watch? Watch what?

"They're holding us," he and Kei Sa said simultaneously.

The queen, the general, and Yen Sa jerked around, unsure at first whom to look at. They settled on Kei Sa, but she smiled and looked at Tempest.

"They don't want us to leave," he said, "but they're not going to hurt us unless we try to. Besides which, I doubt we can leave. They must have some way of keeping us in the building. Either someone's going to try to capture us, they're going to send someone to kill us, or they're waiting for a diplomat. Something, but this is no siege."

"Are you sure?" asked the queen.

"The danger isn't here," said Kei Sa. "It's coming, but it isn't here. It's strange and hostile, but the cold is somehow familiar."

"So, what you're saying is, it's a diplomat?" The general gave half a grin.

"My brother would hurt you for that remark," the queen returned.

"Yeah, well, touching as all that is," Lian said from the doorway into the hall, "why won't the doors open?"

The Queen's Honor Guard

>by Nyohah<p>

III.

* * *

><p>Braeden disliked being stared at. Surely everyone disliked being stared at. But all these young Jedi on the little ship with him obviously didn't know that or didn't care. Even Shaak Ti kept smiling at him then stifling her smile into a frown when she remembered that he was not approved of.<p>

Apparently, he was their idol. Radical and out of control or not, they still thought he was the best fighter anyone had ever seen. They were little fighters themselves, every one having participated in the last tournament and eager for the next. Every one wanted tips from the recurring champion. Every one secretly wanted to fight him, secretly convinced that he would be the one to finally beat Braeden.

He felt Shaak Ti smiling at him again and when he smiled backâ€"sarcastically, but she didn't noticeâ€"she was unable to stop.

"We all admire you very much," she confessed.

"Really? I never would have guessed." More sarcasm, but it wasn't a technique that her race, unlike his, ever used; she was oblivious. The other Jedi were too far away to hear.

"Oh, yes," she said eagerly. "We've all seen all the holos of your fights in the tournament. They're simply remarkable."

"Yeah, thanks. Especially the last, don't you think?"

Her three head-tails pattered against her shoulders and back.

"My crowning achievement, don't you think?" he continued, pleased at her shock. "Although the last few days have been fun."

She recovered quickly. "Most unwise of you to defy palace guards in that manner. It's a wonder they let you go on this mission. Why do you jeopardize your calling, when you were in your prime as a Jedi, and now, when you can get it all back?"

"It's a matter of principle."

"Then your principles are vastly different from those of the Calyaar as a whole. They seem in direct opposition to those presented in your literatureâ€"the transcripts of your plays, anyway. I guess you don't have literature."

"Those are the galactic society as a whole's foibles. They are not in any way representative of the Calyaar."

"But your plays embrace them so thoroughly."

"Trust me; they don't," he said, closing his eyes and crossing his

feet. Even sentients who understood sarcasm often did not realize from transcripts what was obvious from performances of Calyaar plays—“they mocked and vilified galactic society. Calyaar rarely left their planet because they hated the outside world. Visitors were kept out to avoid tainting the Calyaar culture. Braeden had been warned not to leave, but he had gone anyway, and he had failed. He was tainted.

"I'm surprised you even speak to me," he said. "I'm dangerous, remember?"

She whispered, afraid the others would hear. "I never understood why they threw you out for one sadistic fight."

"Huh. There's hope for you yet." He grinned.

* * *

><p>Yen Sa's first reaction to Lian's demand was irritation, not worry. They'd always had trouble with the mechanized doors in this building. He guessed it was old, and the circuitry was glitchy. Sometimes the doors wouldn't respond to the buttons beside them; sometimes a door would slam open or shut far more quickly than usual when someone just walked by. Once, the door to the bathing room had clanged open and back shut every second without reason. It had taken him a day and a half to find the glitchy bit of code and another day to figure out how to fix it.</p>

But one miraculously fixed number didn't give him any idea how the doors actually worked, and when Lian announced that they hadn't even made it to the outside doors—that it was basically every door in the building except those that never worked that were 'locked', and they were 'trapped like rats'—that was when Yen Sa's stomach turned queasy.

"They can operate our doors better than we can," he said. "We're trapped."

"Like rats, Yen Sa," Lian repeated. "Rats. Smelly vermin. That's what we are to these people. I can't be the only one who's worried what they'll do to us."

"No, we can fight," Tieh Chen Yi said. "We've driven back attacks before. We actually have the advantage here, since they'll be coming through one at a time."

"Yeah, or maybe they'll just open the door, roll a bomb in here, shut the door, and leave," said Lan Yiao Nih. "That's what I'd do."

"Rats," said Lian.

"Yen Sa," said the general.

"I know," he answered, already trying to find out how it was they had been locked in. The power wasn't out, so it must be a program of some sort. The real problem was how he would hope to have the skills to override it.

"Or they could just poison us," said Zhen.

"Yes, I like the poison idea much better," Lan said. "That's what I'd do."

"Yeah, well I don't like the idea of my starving in here with all of your green, bloated, putrefying corpses," Zhen said.

Yen Sa found the program, and his queasiness struck again. "Can I have some quiet in here please?" he yelled. The characters for the program were scrolling by almost too fast to be seen, and worse, they seemed to be in the Basic alphabet that looked nothing like the English one he somewhat knew.

"For being our death warrant," Lian said, looking at the screen, "it's kind of pretty."

* * *

><p>With the fifteen best Jedi Knight fighters and the legendary Braeden Leer behind her, Shaak Ti felt that her mission was not fated to fail as all previous attempts to fight the Mandalorian Supercommandoes had been. The Jedi now had sole control of the building the Mandalorians had chosen as their headquarters, a building that would keep them incarcerated as well as any prison. It was their fault for choosing and abandoned agricultural 'worker's colony'â€"easy to defend and self-sufficient, but also set up to keep the slaves inside at all costs in the event of an uprising. Its use of outdated, experimental fiber-optic wiring so the slaves wouldn't have access to electricity meant that they couldn't even manually override their doors. There was no escape for the Mandalorians.<p>

She didn't know who the people surrounding the complex were. They looked military, but she thought the troops had retreated some time before. But as they made no reaction to the Jedi shuttle landing on the complex's roof, she supposed they could be appreciated as just another level of defense or defeated soldiers eager to see their foes' ends.

The seventeen Jedi disembarked from the shuttle, and at Shaak Ti's signal, one of the Jedi Knights pushed a key on his mini-datapad and opened a roof ventilation shaft. They slid carefully down the shaft and crept noiselessly to the control room that all thirteen Supercommandoes were trapped in. The Jedi outnumbered them, and especially with Braeden Leer along, she was sure they outmatched even the Supercommandoes' fighting prowess. Their strange powers were perhaps to be feared, but Shaak Ti had 'strange powers' of her own.

She and the fifteen Jedi ignited their lightsabers just outside the control room, and she turned to nod at Braeden Leer, her way of giving him her respect.

He was gone.

* * *

><p>"This is a bit of an emergency, isn't it, Ming?" Wei Yong said. The accusation in his tone made her want to snap at him and start some silly argument, but he was right. It was an emergency.<p>

"We grew complacent here in our cozy little base," he continued, "and now everyone is paying for it."

"Don't be smug now, Wei Yong. If you had really wanted to recommence running around this galaxy receiving clues about the use of clones leading us to their source, but never enough to get any closer to itâ€"if you had wanted that, you would have tried harder. You were tired like the rest of us. No one else supported you, did they? We made our own fate; now we have to face it."

"Stupid doors," whispered Wei Yong, glancing at Yen Sa, who was working frantically.

"They're close," said Kei Sa, igniting her light blades. "Jedi."

"Well, there's a surprise," said Lan.

"I know our elemental powers have not had much success with the Jedi in the past, but I will try to destroy their minds. Who else has a chance?"

"We already know my poisoning them from afar didn't work very well," said Zhen.

A funny look crossed Cai Yue's face, and he said, "I know this isn't the time, but rememberâ€"" He saw the looks he got and said, "Well, no. Later."

"My water doesn't work either," said Lian. "They just pushed it away. Same with Vendetta's fire, Quy's smoke."

"I can trap them," said Cai Yue, "but they can still move things with their minds."

"The more destructive elementsâ€"wind, earthâ€"would hurt us as much as them in this little place," said Wei Yong. "And conducting electricity in a metal building would be kind of bad."

Mind sighed. "And there's no plants. It's up to you, Kei Sa."

Everyone ignited their weapons except Yen Sa, who was pushing buttons with abandon.

The door in front of them clanged open, and Kei Sa shut her eyes. Among normal troops, her attack had a one hundred percent success rate. One of the Jedi fell, and the rest were startled. The door shut.

"Their powers give them amazing mental defenses," Kei Sa said. "I cannot kill them."

"We'll just have to do this the old-fashioned way," said Wei Yong.

The door behind them opened.

"What did I do different?" asked Yen Sa.

"It doesn't matter," said Ming. "There's no one waiting to kill us behind this door. Quick, we have to go."

"Yes," said Wei Yong. "Even if it's a trap, it's better than here. We know this is a trap. You first," he added to his wife

She nodded and stepped outside.

The door shut.

"Ming!" shouted Cai Yue from inside.

"I'm here; I'm not hurt!"

"Yen Sa didn't do anything. We don't know what happened."

"Get the door open!"

"We don't knowâ€"they're coming! There are more of them than there are of us. Mingâ€"" He grunted, and she heard a crash.

"If Yen Sa gets the doors open, go to the ship, Ming," came her husband's voice instead, and tears came to her eyes.

She chewed on her thumbnail and forced herself not to cry. She even managed to stop the happy tears that came when she finally heard Cai Yue's voice again, alive and fighting.

Then behind her, barely discernable over the battle's cacophony, she heard someone tap a foot.

* * *

><p>Mere seconds after the door closed behind Ming, the door across from it opened, as suddenly as the other had. Unlike the other, it opened to reveal a cluster of armed Jedi. Wei Yong, near the door Ming had exited through, was across the room from where he would have done the most good, but he was not the only experienced fighter there. Even as suddenly as the door had opened, nine of the twelve other fighters were ready for battle, their weapons ignited. Yei Sa was working on opening the door, and Rah Cai Yue was talking to Ming through the door.<p>

The Jedi tried to enter, but Lian, Tempest, and Vendetta were all but linking arms and daring the Jedi to try to break their grasp to keep them out of the room. Wei Yong ignited his blade but kept back. There were still six honor guards waiting to fight. He turned his attention to Yen Sa, who was nearly hyperventilating in panic and muttering to himself, far too immersed in technology to notice Wei Yong looking at him.

A female Jedi with red skin, wide horns, and three long tails coming off her head raised her hand, and Lian, Tempest, and Vendetta were thrown backward by an invisible force. Lian collided with Cai Yue, who was still yelling through the door at Ming. Cai Yue slammed against the wall, grunted as his head hit hard, then fell unconscious. Vendetta landed on a table, and it broke with a crash.

Wei Yong stepped to the door, and helped Lian off Cai Yue. "If Yen Sa gets the doors open, go to the ship, Ming," he yelled at the door, then turned to face the Jedi now entering the room.

The quarters were cramped. The honor guard could hardly move without eviscerating a friend, but luckily, the Jedi had the same problem. The small room had its advantages though: it made it possible for the honor guard to hold one side of the room—the Jedi would have had to walk through their weapons to get past them—and thus protect Cai Yue by the door Ming had disappeared through, and Yen Sa, at a computer near the side door. It also negated the Jedi's advantage in numbers; not all of them could reach a Mandalorian.

Still, the tight quarters were annoying. Wei Yong grunted in frustration every time his weapon collided with someone's he wasn't fighting.

Beside him, Zhen let his weapons disappear and grabbed his opponent's hand, who started to look immediately sickly, but Wei Yong had to block the poisoned Jedi's light-sword before he slammed it into Zhen's head. Zhen hastily recreated his weapons and looked abashed.

At the end of the row, Quy Ling hissed in pain, and Wei Yong looked over to see him stumble backward, holding a hand. The Jedi he had been fighting overbalanced and swung his light-sword into a wall. A flash of light erupted from the gash.

The light seemed to rouse Cai Yue, who shook his head, sat up on one elbow, and raised his hand. The Jedi were sucked through the doorway they came from and smashed into a group quite a ways beyond it. Two screamed in pain as they were speared by light-sabers that were not turned off.

Behind Wei Yong, Yen Sa snapped his fingers. "This wiring," he said, "it doesn't carry electricity." He reached into the gash in the wall, pulled out a wire, and touched his finger to the end.

The side door opened.

"Light wiring?" Wei Yong asked dubiously.

"Officially the best wiring ever," laughed Yen Sa.

"Let's go," said Tempest.

"Right," said Wei Yong.

Chen Yi helped Cai Yue to his feet, and they all ran.

* * *

><p>Braeden was completely out of patience. First, he'd been stared at. Then he was stuck in a group of Jedi who were trying to ambush their enemies by being capable of attracting a flock of vrdvs—deaf, carnivorous birds from his home planet—with just their breathing, not to mention the clomping of their feet and the rustling of those awful robes. He had simply needed to get away before he lost his temper. They might as well have been skipping to their enemies with their lightsabers ignited and singing a jolly

little folk song. And now this Mandalorian woman he had let out of the door he'd opened had failed to notice him at all. True, he had been hiding when she had first come out to avoid warning her back into the room before he could shut the door again. And true, he actually was silent, so he couldn't blame her ears. But he was ready for her now, and she seemed to be engrossed on the door he'd opened and shut, having some human-femalish emotional breakdown if her irregular breathing and the racing of her heart meant the same for Mandalorians as they did for humans.

He lifted the toes of one foot and slammed them on the ground in an ill temper. She didn't move. He tapped his foot again—"four, five, six times, and finally she turned.

She gasped and suddenly her light blade was there; it was as long as his double-bladed lightsaber, and she held it as a staff. It was also a rich, true green, like that of the forest, not like the washed-out green of his home waters or the fluorescent green of his lightsaber.

He ignited both ends of it and her heart skipped again. She was unused to seeing a different style of weapon in the hands of a Jedi. He was grateful that her emotions had such a physical effect on her. She'd be easier to read. He concentrated on her heart, the pulse of her blood, her breathing—"she had a little catch in her throat as if she was getting ill. He hoped she was vocal in her fighting; it would make her easier to track and help counterbalance the advantage she had in a silent weapon.

She stepped forward, soft soles of her shoes padding on the hard floor, clothes rustling. She attacked with a quick but mundane thrust of her right hand, testing his speed. He parried easily and was surprised at the amount of sparks—"very rare in lightsaber-on-lightsaber collisions. Whatever her weapon was, it was completely incompatible with his.

She kicked at his ankle with her left foot, and as he stepped backward to avoid the kick, she switched feet with a one-hundred and eighty degree hop, planting her left foot and knocking him backward with a kick to his stomach with her right foot.

He was impressed. She was sufficiently quick, and he didn't often encounter opponents who used their legs so freely in an armed fight. He would have to keep her from kicking—"low kicks were hard to track with his vision and without using the Force. He assumed she knew enough not to kick high when he had his weapon. He'd have her leg off in a heartbeat. One of hers.

As he regained his footing, she attacked high with her weapon. He blocked with the left side of his lightsaber, holding the weapon horizontal to counter her vertical strike. She swung the bottom half of her weapon toward his stomach. He spun his weapon to bring his right lightsaber down to push her weapon to the side.

Then he took the offensive.

Then (humiliation!) he lost it in three strokes.

He had thought he had her. It was a trick he'd used innumerable times before. The fourth stroke would have either left her armless if she

didn't block or open to a full-force head-butt if she did, but he didn't quite make it to the fourth. At the very instant she blocked the third, she knocked him off his feet with one of those pesky ankle kicks that was so subtle and quick that it confirmed all his suspicions of the first having been an elaborately telegraphed feint.

He swung his lightsaber at her feet from the ground. She jumped over it, back-flipping far enough away to give him time to rise. But she switched her grip on her weapon to hold it at the very far end—another advantage he had over him, and swung it at him as he began to rise, forcing him to hit the ground again. She continued to swing it crudely from side to side in front of her, the weakness of the move countered by her now having more than twice his range.

He had one new advantage, although she kept him on the ground. Holding her weapon like that, she had not only less control, but also a weaker grip. He should easily be able to knock it out of her hands. But he couldn't, though by all rights every swing of his weapon jerked her arms so fiercely that hers should have flown out of her hands and hit the wall. On the fourth strike, he managed to hit her blade so hard that it fizzled out, but a split-second later, it reappeared in her hands in the original grip, giving him just enough time to roll backward into a standing position. She began to spin in her weapon in vertical strikes, shifting from arm to arm in a display of agility he couldn't mimic because he'd cut his own arms off.

He was in a bit of trouble.

With a guttural expression of annoyance in his own language, Braeden opened himself up to the Force. It was like being alive again—everything was vibrant and full of the energy of life, and so clear to see with unfailing eyes. In that instant he knew hers were the very green of her blade.

Braeden closed his eyes and hated how complete he felt. He could only pretend to have been missing nothing until the gap was noticeably filled.

Her pesky little feet were shifting slowly, silently, across the floor, and she rotated her weapon one half-turn so she held it straight up and down. It was a beacon of life energy—the life energy—and the means by which she focused it were tied to her hands. He couldn't touch her weapon, couldn't manipulate the energy that powered it. He still couldn't disarm her.

She hopped in from the side, thinking that with his eyes closed and her movements silent, she could take him by surprise. He hit her blade in the exact middle with his, right between her hands and heating the flesh of both of them. He pushed it away with such force that he turned her, then kicked her in the back and sent her sprawling to the floor on top of her weapon. She tried to kick him off his feet, and he jumped. When he landed she had rolled onto her back and was bring her weapon toward him, holding it at one end again for added range. He slammed it as hard as he could, and this time when it flickered out, he reached out with the Force and ripped her finally vulnerable gloves off.

She gasped and looked up at him with wide eyes as he kept one side of his lightsaber a few inches from her heart.

32. IV

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

IV.

* * *

><p>Somehow, probably because Cai Yue's eyes were still half-unfocused for the entire trip, they got to their ship before they remembered Ming.<p>

"Someone's sta ge'er," he said, blinking.

"Someone has to get the people to their ships, too," said Lieutenant Nai.

Vendetta whirled on him. "Someone has to get the queen. I've sworn to protect her; haven't you? Aren't we the Queen's Honor Guard?"

"Oh, so now you protect her with as much ferocity as you killed for her father?" said Hua Quy Ling. "Why don't I trust you?"

Vendetta glared. "We have to protect the queen. She's more important than anyâ€"or allâ€"of the people."

"She's just a figure-headâ€"" said Captain Lan.

Wei Yong kicked the wall. "She's my wife!"

"An' you forgot 'er," Cai Yue muttered, leaning heavily on the wall Wei Yong had kicked.

"She's the only one the Vyrenchi will talk to," said Kei Sa.

"â€"_but_!" yelled Lan. He waited until everyone quieted. "She's a really important figure-head, and some of us hereâ€"" he looked at Cai Yue, Kei Sa, and Wei Yong, who was still glaring at him, "are obviously really attached to her. I'll get her."

"What?" snapped Lian.

"We'll have a much better chance if we all go," Tieh Chen Yi said. "Those Jedi are still there."

"We'll probably all die if we all go," Lieutenant Nai said. "Little tricks aren't going to save us again."

"That wasn't li'l," Cai Yue pouted, looking at his fingertips, then sucking a panel off the wall onto them.

"Please don't dismantle the ship," Nai said.

"Who said mass force is the way to go?" Lan said. "I'm talking sneaky stuff. Ninja stuff."

"Then why don't we send the ninjas?" Chen Yi said.

"Because we don't trust the ninjas," Quy Ling said through his teeth.

"And we trust him?" said Lian. "He's the traitor, remember?"

"Then who do you suggest?" said Wei Yong.

"Me. I'll go."

"Well, we can't send the slacker," said Lan. "He'll probably get distracted, or decide he's too tired halfway there and take a nap."

"Having to wonder if my companion is going to stab me in the back would probably keep me on my toes, don't you think?"

"I'd probably have to stab you to keep you going. You'd probably go coward halfway there."

"I like danger. Danger is fun."

"Danger is more than fun. It's what keeps us alive and interesting."

"No, don't sully it with your mercenary ways. It's what keeps life interesting."

"That's what I just said."

"Just go!" yelled Tempest.

Lan and Lian stopped and stared for half a second, startled by the reserved ex-Lin Kuei's outburst.

"Really, please go," Wei Yong said. "And hurry."

They ran from the room.

"The rest of you, get the people to their ships. I don't think I need to tell you to be quick about it."

Quy Ling stepped up to him, bending his head down slightly to whisper at Wei Yong, the shorter man. "Do you think they'll actually make it?"

"Either their bickering will create competition and improve their chances, or they'll kill each other."

Quy Ling sighed. "We've as much as abandoned her."

"Don't worry about Ming. She can take care of herself. Trust me, I know," he added with a wry smile.

The younger man didn't look satisfied, but he bowed and left to do his duty.

"And if they don't come back in a while," Wei Yong added to the wall,

"we'll send someone else." He kicked it again.

* * *

><p>The pale Jedi held his bright green blade steady, ready to puncture her heart. Ming couldn't look at it, focusing her eyes instead on the curious towel-like fabric he had wrapped around his neck, the only pink of his skin showing barely above its top edge, the trails of water dripping from it darkening his gray shirt.</p>

He didn't kill her.

The silence increased into such a void that Ming could hear a squeaky, little gasp in her breath, and she wanted to cry because it made her sound like a child. She thought maybe she was just a child: she was selfish like a child, and she fought with her husband like a child.

She could see his blade move, though she tried not to.

She still pouted over Cai Yue like a child. She thought she could avoid her fate by pretending she didn't see it, like a child.

He didn't kill her. When she looked down, he had moved his blade away from her chest.

"Get up."

She watched a drop of water be absorbed into his shirt.

"I'm not going to hurt you if you do what I say," he said slowly.
"Now stand up. Slowly."

She did as he said, and he glanced down for a split second to push a button on a device he had strapped to his wrist, then jerked his weapon toward the door.

"You first."

She walked.

Following closely behind her, the hum of his still-ignited weapon ringing in her ears, the Jedi began to question her. She never said a word.

* * *

><p>"Lian," Lan said, speed-walking beside him at a ridiculous pace as they tried to beat each other to the base without being obvious about it, "I doubt this has entered your lazy little brain, but I don't think there will be enough doors open for us to sneak inside there."</p>

"Well, I'm so glad I have your military brain to tell me these things," Lian answered, squinting as the light of the planet's large sun began to come over the horizon. "What does your military brain say to this?" He viciously ignited his weapons, trying to get the captain to jump.

He didn't. "And those beacons aren't going to help us sneak

in."

"Who said anything about sneaking in?"

Lan stopped short and grinned. Lian stopped a few paces ahead and turned to glare at him.

"Look at you," he said nodding his head in approval, "you're determined."

"I don't really like light shows anymore."

"What?"

"The Jedi."

"Hate 'em."

"Me, too. Do you want the seven on the left or the seven on the right?"

"Right," Lan said, then laughed and started running.

* * *

><p>Braeden knew his captive understood the language. She had stood slowly when he told her to, but now she pretended to be confused at everything he said. Too late. He wasn't that blind.

The sound of a struggle—"thumps, blades crashing, screaming"—further along his way stopped his transporting of the Mandalorian girl for a few minutes. He heard various exclamations in Basic, and the girl seemed to get a bit of a grin on her face. Finally, there was a cry in a language that Braeden couldn't place, then shouts of victory in Basic and other languages he had heard many times, and his captive became distressed and looked as though she wanted to run to the scene. He had to point his lightsaber at her chest again to keep her from bolting.

"Walk," he said, when all was quiet again.

She turned, looking at the ground, and continued going in the direction he pointed. Braeden opened two doors, then rounded a corner into the hallway where the Jedi had gathered.

"I have a prize," he sang.

The captive turned to him with a horrid glare on her face that made him want to laugh. He could only see it because he was still embracing the Force—he tried to tell himself that he was because he couldn't risk her getting the slip on him again, but the truth was that it was hard to let go.

He turned to the captive and triumphantly said, "I knew you could speak our language," but she was no longer glaring.

She was staring at the bodies on the floor. Her hand came up to cover her mouth, and she started to cry. Loudly.

Lying on the floor were four dead Jedi in seared brown robes and the

two men who had put them there, both Mandalorian.

"Oh," Shaak Ti said. "You got a live one. That's a lot better than these. Dissection probably won't do us much good, but I believe that these gloves are the wayâ€" "

Braeden held up the gloves he had taken off of his captive's hands.

"You figured that out, of course," Shaak Ti continued. "It's very strange, though, isn't it, how their weapons don't harm them."

"They're made of the life force of the people who wield them," Braeden said flatly. The deaths of the two Mandalorians began to cut into him. "You can't hurt yourself with your own life force."

"Well that's very interesting. How did you find that out?"

"I looked."

"Oh." Shaak Ti looked unsatisfied. "Here, let us take her." She reached toward the Mandalorian woman.

"No," Braeden said, and pushed her behind him.

"This is part of the mission," Shaak Ti insisted. "Our orders. Let us take her."

Braeden held up his lightsaber, and Shaak Ti took a step back in shock.

"I think I understand," she said, frowning, "why you wereâ€" "

"Don't," said Braeden. "Don't even think about making a comment like that again."

The other Jedi were beginning to mull around behind Shaak Ti, looking as though they all struggled with wanting to just take Braeden out and wanting to beat him in a fair match, one on one.

They never got the chance to decide. Precisely one second before fifteen hundred hours by Braeden's chronometer, the door to the room slid open, and twenty armed Republic soldiers walked in.

The officer in charge paced with perfect form to Braeden and saluted him.

"You're an entire second early, Lieutenant," said Braeden, glancing at the officer's rank pin.

"Your chronometer's slow," the lieutenant said seriously, and Braeden had to grin.

"Did Tascilo send enough of you?" Braeden asked sarcastically. "You've got the whole place surroundedâ€"do you think there's enough of you?"

"The general thought that there might be a battle, and we should be

prepared. The entire force was volunteers."

"Really?" Braeden clicked his tongue. When men were loyal to Tascilo, they were loyal. Then he remembered the human's last sentence. "Was, lieutenant? Surely they haven't all been killed by the Mandalorians."

"No one's been killed. I gave the men orders to leave after you sent us confirmation of a capture. They were needed elsewhere."

"Of course," Braeden said. "We can handle ourselves, can't we?"

"We'll begin securing a room in which to keep the prisoner," the lieutenant said, "and the general said that you will be in charge of the interrogation." He pointed to Shaak Ti, and she smiled. "You will be allowed to observe, but have no authority, and the rest of the Jedi will have to wait outside."

Shaak Ti frowned at the snub, but the lieutenant gave Braeden a look that said, "Politics..._sigh_..."

Braeden decided that he liked this human.

Shaak Ti turned her frown upon Braeden.

"There's something wrong with this conflict," he said firmly before she could speak, "and we are not killing anyone else until we know what it is."

* * *

><p>Hua Quy Ling was used to silence. He was silent. His wife was even more silent. He'd spent a great deal of his life wishing for itâ€"as a bodyguard to an emperor with a temper, silence meant he didn't have anything more to do, and he wasn't going to be punished.</p>

Some silence was unbearable, though. Such as when all the queen's guards left her behind in a locked building with a bunch of enemies then sent on a rescue mission the two most reckless and least likely to succeed of the group. For instance.

In his current situation, he would welcome the silence that had meant probable safety and excruciating boredom as a guard. That sort of silence was dispelled by playing word games with oneself or by spinning one's sword on the ground when no one was paying attention. Or by imagining cruel emperors and heartless ninjas meeting a thousand gruesome deaths.

For instance.

This sort of silence devoured everything around it, a cloud of poisonous vapor spreading ever outward to vanquish everything around it. It sucked the life out of everything and everyone.

Except Rah Cai Yue, of course, whose vivacity, as usual, seemed amazingly resilient.

"I know this still isn't the time," he said, the first thing spoken

since Lian and Lan had left, "but I have to know, Zhen."

Zhen rasped, "Know," then cleared his throat, and started again. "Know what?"

"Poisoning from afar. You said you couldn't do it at the tournament, but I've seenâ€""

"Cai Yue," said the general. "It is not the time."

"I know," the priest repeated harshly. "But if I talk about this then I won't have to think so much about how Ming is not here."

The two stared at each other for a few seconds, the general looking as though he was going to speak again. Then he looked down and twisted his hand like he was imagining spinning a sword.

"Like I was saying," Cai Yue continued, "you said you couldn't do it, Zhen, but you did when we disabled all those pirates' ships a few months ago."

"Yes, that is true," Zhen said. He glanced up once at Cai Yue, then quickly turned and looked at the wall, flushing.

"So he learned how to do it, Cai Yue," said Chen Yi. "It's nothing special. We've all learned a lot since we formed this group."

"But he didn't just say he couldn't do it," Cai Yue said. "He said 'of course not', as though the thought was absurdâ€"as though to poison something from afar was impossible."

"Yes, I said that," Zhen said.

"So, explain," said Cai Yue.

"No," Zhen said.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"Why do I have to have a reason to not want to do something? Shouldn't not wanting to do it be enough?" Zhen looked around at everyone. No one spoke. "Sometimes you just don't want to do something for no reason, right?"

"Just tell him what he wants to know, Zhen," said the general, "or he'll never shut up."

Cai Yue glared at him again.

Zhen sighed. "I could poison people from afar even then. We were in front of a very large group of people who were frightened enough by everyone using elements that I didn't want them to know that I could kill them where they stoodâ€"sat."

"Zhen," said Yen Sa, "you do realize that almost all of us could do that then. Not me, of course, but, well, everyone else except

for..."

"Well." Zhen faltered. "But. Poison is such a mysterious thing. It works completely unseen."

"So does air, Zhen," said Tempest. "And wind if nothing's blowing around."

"I just didn't want them to know," Zhen said. "Are you going to tell me I need a reason for that too?"

It was an interesting pointâ€"that Zhen was very strangeâ€"but nothing they didn't already know. No one even laughed. Silence regained control.

The minutes passedâ€"the general still pretending to spin a sword, Tempest looking asleep, Vendetta looking stir-crazy, the others fidgeting in various other ways, Zhen still not meeting anyone's eyesâ€"and still no one would state the obvious. They would instead let the silence oppress them into doing nothing rather than break its hold with an unpleasant truth.

Quy Ling spoke. "Lian and Lan are not coming back."

"A stealth mission takes time," Chen Yi said. "We have to give them time."

The general shook his head, then looked to Kei Sa.

She shook hers.

"Well," the general said. "Lan and Lian are not coming back."

Zhen looked at him, finally meeting his eyes, his own embarrassment overwhelmed by the corroboration.

"Lan and Lian have not rescued Ming, and they are likely dead."

Everyone shifted at the unpleasantness but the ninjas, who were highly trained in physical control, and Kei Sa, who had flawless physical control by nature. No one, however, was in any way surprised.

"But just because Lan and Lian are dead doesn't mean Ming is," the general said. "They likely did not even come close to finding her, knowing them. So we send another mission, and we send a properly thought out one this time."

"Stealth, I assume, is the key to this mission?" said Tempest.

"There's no other way," answered the general. "So you're my first choice, Tempest. Who do you recommend?"

Tempest didn't speak for a few seconds, giving the subject obvious thought. "Chen Yi is probably our best fighter, and he has the self-control necessary for stealth. I would take Lieutenant Nai, but I don't think laser bolts will do any good."

"Who else?"

"You need me to work the doors," Yen Sa said. "They're operated by light."

"Tempest?" asked the general.

"Yes."

"Let me go," said Cai Yue.

"Cai Yue," the general said softly, "we shouldn't let emotions affect our choices here. We have to be very cautious and deliberate."

"I was excellent on the last mission--the one to destroy the ships? Gravity is great for this sort of thing."

"He was a great asset," said Tempest. Before the general could protest again, Tempest added, "We shouldn't take more than four."

"So he gets to go and I don't?"

"You have to stay with the people. You're absolutely in charge now. And we really shouldn't take more than four."

The general swallowed, then nodded. "Well, good luck then. Be careful."

Quy Ling nodded. This group had a chance.

* * *

><p>When he left the ship, the first thing Tieh Chen Yi noticed was that all the soldiers who had been surrounding the building had left. He had completely forgotten about them in the panic after the attack--just as he had forgotten about Ming. He felt ridiculous and green for having completely lost his head, but the fact that all of them had made him feel slightly better.</p>

They were still out of sight of the building, so he decided he could whisper.

"Were the soldiers still here when we left the building?"

"I don't know," answered Rah Cai Yue.

"They couldn't have been," said Yen Sa. "We would've noticed if they were."

"Considering none of us noticed that the queen had not managed to leave the building," Tempest said, "I don't think we can trust that the soldiers weren't there just because we didn't notice them."

"Don't look at me," said Cai Yue. "I'm the one who was concussed."

"I forgot about that when I picked you," muttered Tempest.

"Well, thank you for your confidence," said Cai Yue.

"But if the soldiers were there, why wouldn't they have stopped us?" said Yen Sa. "You said they were here to keep us from leaving, Tempest."

"I said they were here to keep us here until something else arrived," he answered. "So if they didn't keep us here, that something else obviously arrived."

They approached the building. It was unguarded now that the soldiers had left.

"What if it wasn't until something else arrived?" said Chen Yi. "What if it was until they had captured someone?"

"They have our queen," said Cai Yue bitterly, "and they know it."

"Do you think there's someone behind this door waiting to kill us?" said Yen Sa.

"This building has a lot of doors," Tempest said. "If I were them, I would guard the prisoner, not the doors. They have to know there's nothing we can do to take out the lot of them at once. We'd have done it when we were fighting them."

"Open it," said Chen Yi.

Yen Sa pried the cover off the controls by the door then studied the wires. A second later, the door slid open. The hallway was empty.

"This is some stealth mission," said Cai Yue, as they walked through the door.

* * *

><p>Braeden Leer felt like beating his head on the table. He didn't know what strange world General Tascilo lived in if he expected a captive to answer questions without any sort of incentive to do so. Using any form of torture was completely out of the question, and they had no rewards to give her. The person asking the questions counted for next to nothing in the galaxy, and she had to know that. It was obvious he was no one of influence anywhere. He was an extremely talented soldier, but he was only a soldier.</p>

The woman wouldn't have talked to the Supreme Chancellor if she'd had stacks of credits and Corusca gems waved in her face. Braeden wouldn't have.

But even Braeden would have said something, albeit something sardonic, after being asked "What is your name?" for the seventeenth time.

She was the most stubborn creature he had ever encounteredâ€"himself, Jedi Masters, and nxln pack animals includedâ€"and she had been glaring, arms and legs crossed, at the exact same spot on the table for the past half hour.

If she wouldn't even tell them something insignificant like her name—"they had no information on her culture so they could gain nothing from it"—how would they ever get answers to the more relevant questions, like where she was from or what her status in her culture was? Or how their ships traveled quickly; they didn't have hyperdrive. Why they even came. Why they fought. How their weapons worked and how they managed to have personal shields.

Shaak Ti couldn't even get the information straight from the woman's mind. The largest obstacle was that she thought in a language none of them could even begin to understand. The images Shaak Ti saw gave them no answers, either. A picture of her world, almost completely covered in ocean, with shockingly green islands didn't help them to determine where it was. They already knew their ships entered violet wormholes. What they needed to know was what they were and how they were made. The other images made no sense. Silver earrings and white makeup. A richly furnished room with a corner that seemed to waver.

"We know you understand us," the lieutenant said again. "What is your name?"

Quite the interrogation.

* * *

><p>They wandered quietly through the building, Yen Sa carefully prying plates off the wall and getting so experienced with opening the doors that he was sometimes able to open them a crack so they could look in before they entered. Sometimes the doors snapped open and startled them with their speed. Yen Sa insisted that different wires did different things, and that they were sometimes in completely different places. Chen Yi wondered if perhaps they were just old and had different sensitivity in different places. They'd always had problems with the doors, after all. Not that he even began to understand how electronics worked.</p>

They all agreed on places where they would store a prisoner if they had captured one, and headed to each in turn. The first three were empty. They'd been in the building for ten minutes and seen no one. Chen Yi began to wonder if the Jedi had taken the queen and left. From the pained looked on his face, Chen Yi imagined Cai Yue had begun to wonder also.

The fourth possibility was a tiny room on the side of a large room that they had used as a cafeteria. As they walked down the hall to the large room, Chen Yi shook his head.

This is some stealth mission, he mouthed deliberately, echoing Cai Yue's earlier comment. Tempest gave him a stern look. He continued so that his comment would not be inappropriate, mouthing, _I think they might have already left._

Yen Sa had taken the panel off beside the door, and it opened a crack. As Yen Sa leaned forward to peer through the crack, it slammed open. Yen Sa tripped backward into Cai Yue in shock.

On the other side stood eight armed Jedi.

* * *

><p>The lieutenant stood up and motioned for Braeden to follow him. They moved to the corner of the room.<p>

"I don't think she's going to answer us," the lieutenant said.

Braeden raised his eyebrows. Maybe this human wasn't all that great.

"Well," he said, "if we worm one answer out of her, we want it to be the big one. Concentrate on that."

The lieutenant nodded sharply, and turned back to the table. He stood, staring at the Mandalorian. She did not look back. Taking a deep breath, the lieutenant said, "Listen to me. My next question is the most important in deciding how the Republic is going to deal with you and your people."

She did not move.

"How and why do you make your clones?"

She did not answer, but her expression changed completely. She moved her head to look more closely at the wall nearest the door, then began to smile.

Braeden sensed a new presence in the room—a strange gathering of energy unlike anything he'd ever encountered. It was completely silent.

The lieutenant followed her gaze, and his brow furrowed. "Strange," he said. "There's distortions along that wall. They remind me of heat waves in the desert."

He looked at Braeden.

Shaak Ti stood. "That's exactly—"

Metal clanged outside, and Braeden heard eight lightsabers ignite in quick succession. He stood up, heading for the door, and Shaak Ti joined him. Just before they reached it, they were slammed into it with stunning force.

Then came the table.

33. V

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

V.

* * *

><p>When Yen Sa fell over backward into him, Cai Yue almost fell too. At first he didn't see what was beyond the door that had caused it to open, but heard a strange snapping sound, then the painfully familiar buzz of the light-sabers used by Jedi.<p>

Tempest and Chen Yi had their weapons ignited by the time he pushed Yen Sa back onto his feet. They stepped backward away from the door as Yen Sa and Cai Yue ignited their weapons. The narrow hallway would give the Mandalorians protection if not an advantage.

As the Jedi rushed through the door, Chen Yi suddenly stumbled forward. Cai Yue looked at him in shock, then felt himself start to be dragged forward, toward several blades of energy so concentrated that they could reflect shots from energy guns and "what Cai Yue detested more than anything in existence at the moment" not even Vyrenchi could absorb the energy quickly enough to protect them.

He reacted the same moment he felt the tug, creating a gravity well on the door on the far wall—the one that led to the room where he would keep a prisoner. As the Jedi were sucked backward into the door, the Mandalorians stopped abruptly. This time Chen Yi almost fell over.

Cai Yue decreased the power of the gravity well when all the Jedi were pressed against the door, keeping it just strong enough to keep them in place without exhausting himself.

"Trapped Jedi," Chen Yi said happily.

"A fitting end for them," agreed Tempest.

Cai Yue started to say something he certainly thought was funny, but then he felt his gravity well's hold on the Jedi shift a little. They moved forward, and the door opened an inch before it slammed shut again and all the Jedi slammed against it. Those in the back groaned in pain.

He increased the force of the gravity well, but the force working against it increased as well. Struggling against the power that pushed to the side, he began to sweat, then to tremble. He knew he would lose eventually. He had the disadvantage. This power was working in one direction, against only half of his gravity well, and utilizing the power of the other half.

The door jumped open, and Cai Yue's gravity well followed it, dragging the Jedi and anything on the other side over with it. The sudden move made Cai Yue lose his concentration, however, and it dissipated quickly. Most of the Jedi fell to the floor, but three managed to stay on their feet and reignite their weapons.

A red-skinned Jedi with thick horns and striped tails coming from her head stepped out from the smaller room.

Instantly, Cai Yue lost all free will. He let his weapon go away and began to walk toward her. The other three followed him. They stopped several feet from her, and, thankfully, she ordered the Jedi not to attack.

A pale-skinned alien in a gray jumpsuit with a white towel around his neck walked out from the room also. Cai Yue recognized him. He had been the one they'd questioned back when they were still rescuing colonies. He'd seemed sympathetic to them then, and Cai Yue felt a wave of hurt at the fact that he'd been helping the Jedi all along.

But he hadn't seemed to like Jedi at all. That remembrance confused him, but only increased the hurt. When the alien walked up to them and stripped the gloves that held the means by which they created their weapons off their hands, the hurt increased into near-hatred.

He retreated from them and said, "Shaak Ti, let them go."

"No," she answered.

"You can always just do it to them again if they start to cause problems." The alien cocked his head as though listening to them. Cai Yue felt strangely as though he were being studied.

"I don't think they will," the alien continued. "Why didn't you just do this in the first place, anyway?"

"I didn't think it would work on them," Shaak Ti said, the words ringing slightly false.

The alien noticed also and raised an eyebrow.

"And I can't let them go becauseâ€" She stopped.

"Because?"

She whispered, "I can only do it when I'm angry."

The alien began to laugh. "Oh, just wait till I tell the Council you used the Force in anger. Maybe they'll kick you out of the Order, too."

Shaak Ti's head-tails twitched, and Cai Yue was suddenly able to move. The pale alien saw the Mandalorians' movements, and said, "Thank you," to Shaak Ti, who looked a little paler. Turning to the Mandalorians, he said, "I don't suppose one of you would be willing to talk to us."

Ming stepped out of the larger room and said, "I'll talk."

"No, that's all right. We already tried you. You're far too stubborn, and there's no reason we can't pick someone else who might be less so."

Ming looked at Cai Yue, then tossed her head to throw her braid over the shoulder, the movement ending with her chin held a full thirty degrees above level.

Cai Yue recognized the movement as a signal and dropped to his knees. The other three looked at him like he was insane. He coughed slightly, and they got the hint and kneeled also.

"My queen," said Cai Yue, trying to think of something as over-the-top as her chin level to say, "your loyal servants have come to rescue you."

The pale alien clicked his tongue in surprise.

* * *

><p>Zhen Feng Qui stared at the bodies that were lying on the floor. The Jedi had dragged them from their original place of death to a small corner room to await autopsyâ€"dissection was more the spirit of the procedure they intended. He had no intention of allowing that. He only hoped he would have the stubbornness of the queen or the natural authority of the general, or better yet, Kei Sa, to back up his wishes.<p>

Lan he didn't much care about. It was sad, sure, the death of an honor guard member. It was the first time one of them had died, and frankly, he suspected that they had all begun to think they were invincible. His thoughts had certainly been heading that way, and the death of one of the honor guardâ€"any one of the honor guardâ€"was sobering when looked upon from a strictly unemotional point of view.

He'd thought all that in the half second of absolute shock before the real news had had time to hit him.

Ta Lian Shi was dead.

One could argue they had all known that before Tempest, bearing bad news, had come back to fetch them for a diplomatic meeting between the Jedi and the Mandalorians. But there had been the chance that they were only captured, or that they were injured and had managed to hide themselves, but were too injured to come back. All they had been sure of was that if Lan and Lian were coming back, they would have been back already.

He imagined that was how it was with all deaths. There was always hope until one saw irrevocable evidence. And that very hope made it worse.

He wasn't sure if he was the only one who had secretly hoped that they were not dead, just unable to return. Everyone else had been more worried about the queen than sad about Lian.

No one else had known Lian since they were seven. No one else had trained beside him for eight years before getting private tutors. No one else had fought him in every tournament in which he had ever fought and lost every single time.

Zhen smiled at the memory, but it was instantly twisted into a grimace as he held back his emotions.

He had been angry every time he lost for the first couple of years, but when he had come to accept that Lian was just better than he was, it had become a private joke of sorts, both of them laughing at the inevitability of the outcome every time. Laughing had come to define their friendship. They each thought the other was funnier than any other person he had ever met, even if other people rarely seemed to think that way.

Lian would never laugh again. He had been a perpetually happy person before they came to this place, and even when the war seemed to be dragging him more than anyone into a mental breakdown, he had retained his sense of humor, even if it had begun to be surrounded by a malice that Zhen had never seen in him before.

He had always been one whose memory could start Zhen laughing again in a completely inappropriate place hours, or days, or longer, after the actual event had occurred. So while Lian himself would never make Zhen laugh again either, his memory might.

But Zhen would have to stop seeing only dead Lian laying on the floor and getting the urge to vomit every time he thought of him first.

* * *

><p>In spite of the deaths of two of her honor guard, Her Righteousness the Queen of Mandalore couldn't keep an unladylike smirk off her face as she watched the pale-skinned Jedi who had captured herâ€"Braeden Leer was his name, and Cai Yue, Wei Yong, and Quy Ling had met him beforeâ€"stare predatorily down at the waking human officer who had tried to keep her in the room.</p>

He'd failed, obviously; her first hard kick to the jaw had nearly knocked him out. And the several punches that had followed had absolutely nothing to do with her anger at the deaths of her guards and her being captured.

It was extremely satisfying that it had taken him this long to wake up; all the honor guard had arrived, exceptâ€"

"Where's Zhen," she asked.

"He's in the room," said Chen Yi.

"What room?"

"The room where the bodies are," answered Cai Yue, "and he fervently begs you to command them not to dissect the bodies."

She opened her mouth to protest his absence, but Tempest had anticipated her.

"Let him be, my queen," he said. "His best friend's been killed." He looked at her pointedlyâ€"or as pointedly as any of Tempest's looks ever got, which meant she could hardly tell his expression had changed.

Remembering what she had thought when Cai Yue had just disappeared and she only thought he was dead, she nodded at Tempest.

A sudden movement caught her eye, and she looked over to see that Braeden Leer had picked the soldier up by his collar and was easily holding him off the ground. "The Mandalorian Queen," he said in a flat voice, overly articulating his consonants, "informs me that you tried to shoot her with your blaster."

"Yes, that is true," answered the soldier. "Please put me down now."

He didn't. "Does it not strike you that I have every right to be angry that you tried to kill our prisoner?"

"Better the dangerous prisoner be dead than escaped."

"No. Not when you have ten Jedi to capture the dangerous prisoner."

Braeden set him down. "And not when the prisoner didn't even try to escape. We're only lucky she kicked you before you actually fired your weapon."

"No, she didn't."

"What?"

"I shot her several times. She had shields."

Braeden turned to face her, and she looked to Honor where he was standing, watchdog-like, at her right hand. "Have I ever told you I love you, Honor?"

The Vyrenchi mewled with pleasure in her head.

She looked back at her captor, but he wasn't as confused as she had expected him to be. "This...energy disruption has a name?"

"He's not an energy disruption; he's Vyrenchi."

"Vyrenchi?"

"They're beings made entirely of energy that live on a planet two orbits closer to the sun than our home planet."

"Which is?"

"Mandalore."

"Which is where?"

Ming shrugged. Braeden Leer raised his eyebrows and looked around at the rest of the room's occupants. The Jedi had been made to stand outside, except the red-skinned one that had been in the room earlier. She had run away crying after she stopped the Mandalorian rescue attempt.

The rest of the room shrugged at him, too.

"This is all of you?" Braeden asked.

"This is my honor guard," Ming answered. "There are thirteen of usâ€"were."

"There are only ten of you in this room."

"Zhen isn't here because you killed his best friend," she answered. "And I command that you return the bodies of our dead to us for proper burial."

Braeden looked dismissive. "Of course. You're a member of your own honor guard?"

She mimicked his attitude. "Of course."

He looked a little peeved. "And none of you ten, the best of your raceâ€"as I'm assuming you're the ones we call Supercommandoes, who can summon elemental forces at will?"

Ming nodded.

"None of you knows where your planet is?"

"Well," Yen Sa said. "It's not on any of your maps. It might be in another galaxy." As Braeden started to nod, Yen Sa added, "Or it might be in this one."

"We know how to get to it," Cai Yue said. "We just don't know where it is."

Braeden raised an eyebrow, then dropped his head and shook it vigorously. Droplets of water flew off his hair. "Never mind," he sighed, raising his head again. "I have a much more pressing question. I want to know aboutâ€¢"

"The clones," Ming interrupted. "We look upon the production of clones to be a horrid enterprise, and we would never tell you anything about it, no matter how much you wanted them because they're a disposable army. It's a transgression against all natureâ€¢"

"If you find them so awful," Braeden said, beginning to pace, "then why do you make them?"

"We don't. Some of our enemies from home do, and we think they are abominations. We will never tell you anything to help you improveâ€¢"

"Why do you bring your enemies' soldiers? If you hadn't, people wouldn't hate you so much. We're fighting you because the people of this galaxy cannot stand the thought of your having clones."

"We don't have clones!" Ming shouted. "We're fighting you because you have clones."

Braeden stopped and stared at her. A few seconds later he began to laugh.

"What?"

Braeden stopped laughing, but didn't answer, kicking the wall instead.

The soldier, from the side of the room where he was still feeling his jaw tenderly, said, "We don't have clones."

The Mandalorians were silent. They had been for awhile, and Ming suspected they had caught on more quickly than she had, distracted by her arguing as she had been. "You have to," she said quietly.

"It's all too awful," Braeden said, and kicked the wall again.

"So you've been fighting us because you thought we had clones, and you hate them," said Wei Yong, "and we've been fighting you because we thought you had clones, and we hate them, when in reality, there were no clones at all."

"That's kind of an impressive mess," said Cai Yue.

"Yes," Braeden said, "it is a very impressive mess. And there's only one thing to do about it, to stop the killing. Take it to Tascilo."

"Take it where?" asked Ming.

"Take it to Coruscant," he said, as though explaining.

"Coruscant?" she asked.

"Center of the universe."

No, she corrected inwardly. That was Mandalore.

34. Part 6: Devastation, I

The Queen's Honor Guard

>by Nyohah<p>

Part 6:

>Devastation
>Twenty-Two Years Before MK1<p>

I.

* * *

><p>The Queen's Honor Guard's days on Coruscant were filled with waiting and diplomatic meetings. There was more waiting than diplomatic meetingsâ€”mostly waiting between diplomatic meetings or waiting on diplomats to actually show up to diplomatic meetings. Or waiting for diplomats to consult other diplomats and get back to diplomatic meetings.<p>

To Rah Cai Yue, and, he suspected, to the rest of the honor guard, all the waiting and diplomatic meetings added up to exactly one thing: boredom. Their entire stay on Coruscant had been one of boredom, besides the short-lived chaos that had occurred shortly after their arrival. Judging from the glimpses he had gotten of Coruscant outside conference rooms and senate chambers, his stay on Coruscant should have been anything but.

It was the most populated planet he had ever seen. Skyscrapers covered the planet's entire surface except the tiny tourist spots of its polar icecaps, and the skyscrapers were so tall that the streets on the ground were long since forgotten. Standing on the topmost levels where the diplomatic meetings were located, one looked out the windows down into a vaguely orange haze that, he assumed, continued to rise with the buildings. Looking out the one window they had between the eleven of them in their hotel, below haze level, they looked down to a ground so far away that it was impossible to see at first glance. Whether it was impossible to see at all, Cai Yue didn't know, because he got too dizzy trying.

The planet was a menagerie of metal and lights and peopleâ€”more people than he knew existed, in a number of races exponentially larger than he had imagined possibleâ€”and he had known at his first glance into a downtown area that the planet offered more things to do with a spare moment or a spare hour than he had thought necessary,

few of which, of course, were appropriate for a priest.

But that wasn't the point. The point was that arriving on Coruscant and experiencing the galactic government made him appreciate the comparatively quaint I-am-ruler-by-birth-my-word-is-all-mwa-ha approach that was used by all the planets in his home galaxy, except for some places on Earth and all of Viri, which didn't count because the Vyrenchi didn't actually have a government.

And it was his home galaxy, not section of galaxy or whatever else they may have thought. One talk with some of the Republic's scientists had informed them that the Unknown Regions that made up the blank spot of Yen Sa's map had actually been seen by their advanced observation equipment well enough to show that there were no solar systems to match those of home. It was slightly disappointing to Cai Yue for reasons he could not put into coherent thought given his intense desire to leave the place and never come back. When they were fighting, when he had a purpose, he had wanted to go home, of course, but it had been a containable, understandable wish. Somewhere in the midst of all the waiting, it was like a pocket had burst, and the desire, previously contained, had soaked every part of him. He couldn't escape it. He could only wish that the efficiency of the Republic's government could compare to the efficiency of their telescopes-that-were-not-really-telescopes.

It was, after all, two weeks of absolute boredom before they even met Tascilo, or, for that matter, saw Braeden again.

* * *

><p>The almighty Tascilo who would fix everything turned out to be a medium-height, middle-aged general of the Republic forces. They met, not in a conference room, but in a restaurant that was several stories from the top of a building and verged on being what one would consider fancy without quite being so. When Cai Yue realized that they weren't being reminded by diplomats every twenty seconds that they had a meeting, he began to suspect that the meeting with Tascilo was not an official one. Noticing the restaurant's relative cheapness and, more importantly, seeing Braeden Leer alone and slouching, seemingly asleep, at one of several tables joined together to make room for the honor guard confirmed his suspicions.</p>

Braeden didn't move as they approached, but he said, "Look who's finally here, general."

A man who had been pacing along a wall, who seemed to be looking at the photographs-which-were-not-photographs on the wall until one noticed that his pace was too quick, turned at Braeden's drawl and nodded at them. He was a man of great energy, judging by his movements, which also proclaimed 'military' not quite loudly enough to burst one's eardrums. His pacing was a pinch too regular, his posture that of someone wearing a back brace, and, if that wasn't enough, his precise turns gave everything away. Even his hairâ€"dark, but long since grayingâ€"was cut in a short, flavorless style that made him either military or extremely boring.

Introductions were quick and, after Tascilo introduced himself as a general of the army they had been fighting, awkward on the Mandalorian side. Tascilo was the last to sit, but he began his conversation in a manner that assured Cai Yue he was not another

long-winded diplomat.

"I heard of you, of course," he said, "from incident reports about the attacks on your colonies. They were much too far from Coruscant to have raised much attentionâ€"you were on the Outer Rim, really, and nobody pays much attention to what goes on out there. There was a tiny little footnote came on one of them, though, that created quite a fuss. It said that you had clones."

"We don't have them, though," Ming said.

"Oh, I know," he answered. "Braeden's told me. I had suspected it at the start, and it was foolish of me to have given up those suspicions. You see, there really was no notation on that first report as to the source of the information about clones. People were outraged, however, and, as I'm sure you'll notice about politics here if you stay long enough, right and wrong never matter so much as what the public likes and what the public dislikes."

"That is strange for us," Zhen said, sounding a little melancholy still but trying for humor. "All that matters in our government is what the queen likes and what the queen dislikes."

Ming gave him a slightly mean look, but it was muted by their having company.

"It's a better way of doing this, if you ask me," Tascilo said gruffly. "In our system, however, you were suddenly in the spotlight, although we had sketchy information at best as to what you even looked like, and you were generally reviled. I was troubled by it, and when Braeden's report came to me, I became even more troubled."

"Braeden, you see, had just met youâ€"three of you, I believeâ€"for the first time. He had noticed the differences your powers make in your auras, but nothing else wrong about you. He was as troubled as I was about all the talk the Republic was making about going to war. You may have noticed that the other Jedi don't think very highly of him, but I trust him implicitlyâ€"with the things that matter, that is," Tascilo amended with a quick sigh. "He has a tendency to cause trouble just for the sake of causing trouble."

Braeden grinned. Tascilo shook his head and continued.

"So here I was, one of the leaders of the army, and the army I commanded was headed into a war I didn't support. I guess I must admit to a certain degree of anti-patriotism in that I ratherâ€" He stopped abruptly. A human waitress had approached the table.

"Are you ready to order?" she asked cheerfully, cocking her head.

Cai Yue looked down at his forgotten menu. He couldn't read it anyway. And he didn't recognize the food in any of the pictures.

General Tascilo was quick to pick up on the Mandalorians' confusion. "We'll all have the pastin steak with salads."

"Except me," Braeden said.

"And what would you like?" asked the waitress, turning to give him her full attention with insincere wide eyes.

"What sort of fish do you have?"

"Tonight we only have the fish salad."

"And what kind of fish is it?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "It's just fish."

"Right," said Braeden, closing his eyes, "then I'll have two fish salads without lettuce or any other toppings."

She started to write it down, then stopped and made a little noise in her throat. "So you basically just want two helpings of the fish?"

Braeden smiled at her, all eight of his incisors bared. "You're very perceptive."

She left rather quickly, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Well," Tascilo said, "as I was saying, I used my authority in the army to try to keep you from being attacked, but even my authority only went so far. I do apologize for all the times you were attacked, but there was only so much I could do."

"We understand," Li Wei Yong said.

Tascilo nodded. "I, of course, had no control over the Jedi Council. But when Braeden informed me that the Jedi were sending a team to your baseâ€"immediately after the Republic army had attacked itâ€"I easily got volunteers from the army that had attacked you to keep you there."

"You are influential," Vendetta said, his Englishâ€"Basicâ€"surprisingly good considering the honor guard had only begun to learn it a year ago. "Did you convince them that trapping us there would be the only way to stop us?"

Tascilo sipped from his water glass and nodded. "That was part of it. There were many who saw the logic in capturing one of you to see what was really going on, and Braeden was willing to do it with my support."

"And here we are," said Ming.

"Here we are," Tascilo agreed. "About this clones mess, have you ever thought that there might be a traitor somewhere on your side?"

Their reaction was large, as Cai Yue suspected Tascilo had expected, but it wasn't the exact reaction Cai Yue guessed he thought he'd see. They had suspected a traitor. The marginally suspected traitor was dead, as was his original accuser. They hadn't gotten past that part well enough to look for another.

"We have considered the possibility," Li Wei Yong said evenly.

"I suggest you consider it a great deal," Tascilo responded. "I don't believe there's any way we could have ended up in this sophisticated a mess without help from both sides. Someone on your side knows that one of the things you most revile is clones, and that you believe that anyone who creates them is evil and cannot be trusted. Someone on our side knows that clones are a major public interest issue in the Republic right now. Convince both sides that the other has them and set them against each other, and, as we saw, the fact that both sides have the same complaint with the other muddies up any communication on the subject, making it harder to realize that there are, in fact, no clones."

"We have been over all that in many meetings," said Ming. "And we've decided that no one ever really told us that you had clones. It may have been implied, but we really just assumed that."

"Well," Tascilo said, "be that as it may, that's not the important part. Have you been over how someone in the Republic found out that clones are a sore spot with you when no one in the Republic has ever encountered you before?"

None of them had an answer.

Tascilo seemed partially pleased that he had made his point and partially disconcerted at the reaction he had caused. "I hope you consider the possibility of a traitor," he said.

Cai Yue found himself staring at the table. Even before Lan Yiao Nih had died, he hadn't wanted to believe him a traitor. Now that he was dead...

Cai Yue changed the subject. "Why is it that the Jedi don't like Braeden much?"

Tascilo and Braeden were both startled.

Braeden clicked his tongue, crossed his arms, slouched, and clicked his tongue again.

Tascilo took another sip of his water. "That," he said, "is a long story."

"Oh," Cai Yue answered. "I was just curious, is all."

"Tell them," Braeden said.

Tascilo turned to him. "Really."

"They'll understand," Braeden said.

"Very well. We'll start at the beginning. Bear with me.

"Braeden is a Calyaar, from the planet Calyaar. He's a bit of a rarity in the galaxy as a whole because Calyaar don't leave their planet very often--they dislike the outside world that much. Calyaar is a planet nearly entirely covered in fresh water, with a lot of rock and cave formations. Calyaar themselves are amphibious, with two entirely separate respiratory systems. That towel Braeden wears isn't for fashion." Tascilo gave a wry smile. "It keeps his gills wet so he doesn't get sick."

"Calyaar are also nearly blind. They see sources of light mostly and some blurs of color. Reading, details, even physical features beyond basic size are beyond their ability to discern. To counteract that, Calyaar have extremely good hearing. Both, really, are characteristics of water-dwellers, especially underwater-cave-dwellers. Calyaar hearing has some extraordinary characteristics, mostly that they are able to filter through individual sources of sounds to do things like count, or to focus in on something to hear it better, since they tend to hear everything. Or to filter out sounds that are unpleasant or annoying." Tascilo gave his smile again. "When people say Braeden only hears what he wants to, they're being quite literal."

Cai Yue laughed.

"When Braeden was thirty-one years oldâ€"which is still the equivalent of human teenage years for Calyaarâ€"he was an aspiring playwright."

Cai Yue laughed again, involuntarily, and Braeden cocked his head at him in a none-too-friendly manner.

"You would understand better if you knew anything about Calyaar plays," Tascilo said. "They're the galaxy's most concentrated form of sarcasm, I assure you, and ever since Calyaar was first... 'invaded', as the Calyaar would put it, by races from other planets, they have existed mostly to vilify the society and government outside of Calyaar. So, knowing Braeden, that makes much more sense."

"But when Braeden was thirty-one, Jedi came to his planet. They recognized his ability to use the Force, and against his people's wishes, Braeden went with them to learn the Force. He became a Jedi Master at the age of forty-two, which is an unusually quick advancement. Most Jedi are taught from childhood and don't become Jedi Masters until they're older than that. Even more unusual than the time it took for him to reach that level was the age he was at. Forty-two isn't such an atypical age for human Jedi, but you have to remember that by Calyaar standards he was a great deal younger."

"Braeden was also quite famous, and he became famous long before he became a Jedi Master. You seeâ€"well, as you probably have realizedâ€"despite his lack of visual acuity, he is an astounding fighter. There was a tournament held every year on Coruscant that any Jedi could enter. Braeden won it sixteen times in a row. He was such a celebrity on Coruscant by the third time that they made him change his name. The Calyaar language isn't easily pronounced by other speciesâ€"humans especially. Calyaar isn't even anything close to the real name of the planet."

"So what is Braeden's real name?" asked Ming.

"It'sâ€"ahâ€" _Bih-rih-din_, " Tascilo said. "It's spelled without any vowels, though. They only have the one. I won't even attempt his last name, save to say that it began with _Lir_."

Braeden said it quietly. Cai Yue wouldn't have attempted it either.

"He was really the only Calyaar celebrity the core planets have ever had. They even sold special eyewear at the tournament that would obscure your vision to the point that it was like his."

"Look at the obstacle he overcame!" Braeden said. "Except that he never had good vision so it's not like he ever missed it."

Cai Yue and some of the others this time laughed.

"It was Braeden's seventeenth tournament that got him expelled from the Jedi Order," Tascilo said, and the Mandalorians were serious again. "He's said he was bored, and I imagine, winning against the same people plus a few upstarts sixteen times in a row and still in the prime of his life, always improving—anyone would be bored. Whether that justifies what he did his first match of that tournament is what the Jedi would have you believe is the issue in question."

"And what did he do?" asked Hua Quy Ling.

"He didn't hit or get hit by his opponent for fifty-eight minutes."

The honor guard looked over at him almost as one, and Braeden gave a little shrug.

"Well, to be technical, he didn't hit or get hit by him at all. They called the match after those fifty-eight minutes and sent Braeden straight to a hearing. The Jedi Council stripped him of all his titles, took his lightsaber, and banished him off Coruscant and several other key Jedi worlds. But that's really only half the story."

"The punishment was far beyond the crime," Tempest said.

"Exactly," Tascilo answered. "Braeden was a radical. He had nonconformist ideas about the separation between the dark side and the light side of the Force—mainly that whether you used the Force in anger was not as important as whether you simply used it too much. And he was, of course, very vocal about his opinions. Malicious as that fight had been, those of us who knew what was going on knew that Braeden was thrown out of the Jedi because of politics."

"So they were really unhappy," Braeden said, "to have to resort to using me to capture you, and then to find that I was right, and they were wrong."

"Which would explain why they've been so unfriendly," Cai Yue said.

"No, they're just always like that," Braeden said.

"Oh." Cai Yue raised his eyebrows. Braeden shrugged.

"Look at the time," Tascilo said. "I've talked about twice as much as I intended to, and I haven't heard a thing from you, although I'd love to. And now it's late, and I'm old and need sleep. I will see you tomorrow when you meet with the Supreme Chancellor."

A meeting, Cai Yue hoped, that would rival this one in the not-boring capacity.

35. II

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

III.

* * *

><p>Li Wei Yong was disappointed but not surprised when Supreme Chancellor Palpatine sent his regrets that he was unable to attend his scheduled meeting with the Mandalorians. He wasn't disappointed that he wouldn't get to meet the man. He was, in fact, disappointed that he was not surprised that Palpatine was not coming. They had been pushed aside "out of the spotlight" hastily by the Republic leaders once they realized that they were not really a threat, a response that Wei Yong suspected had much more to do with embarrassment than with the existence of other, more threatening things to which to give the spotlight. The diplomats they met with were long-winded to be sure, but they always had a bit of impatience in continuing discussions once they had said their piece, wanting, Wei Yong imagined, to be somewhere else doing something that they considered important. Palpatine's failure to attend the meeting was just final confirmation that the Mandalorians mattered next to nothing to the Republic leaders.<p>

When's Palpatine's replacement stepped in, however, Wei Yong changed his mind. Let Palpatine go where he please and do what he please if Tascilo was going to stand in for him. His support for them would be appreciated, as well as his respect for time and efficiency, the lack of which was the main obstacle in the way of the Mandalorians' finally returning home.

"Good afternoon," Tascilo said as he sat at the head of the table. "I am General Tascilo of the Republic Army, and it is my pleasure to direct this meeting and to meet all of you. I had planned to attend this meeting and give my opinions, but Supreme Chancellor Palpatine found that he had irresolvable conflicts" his aide's fault, he assures me" and asked me to direct the meeting instead."

Wei Yong quickly understood that Tascilo did not want them to acknowledge that they had had an unofficial meeting the night before" his words had both implied that he had never met them before and answered Wei Yong's questions about the situation. He said, "Remember, we haven't met him before," quickly in Mandalorian to ensure the rest of the honor guard understood as well.

"I am happy to tell you that I come with good news, but I am afraid that I also have some bad news," Tascilo said. "The good news is that the Senate has agreed that this entire conflict was a double-sided mistake, and we agree to peace if you agree to peace."

"Of course we agree to peace," Ming said, and Wei Yong understood the irritation behind her tone; he thought they had agreed to peace a long time ago.

"Excellent," Tascilo said, pulling out a small electronic device. "Here is a document bearing the signatures of the Supreme Chancellor, his top advisors, and the Senators for each of the planets involved in a conflict with you. If your leaders would sign it, please?"

He handed the device to Ming who looked at it in confusion. Wei Yong leaned over to her and saw why. There were no signatures on it that he could see—only a glowing circle and a screen with some strange twisting models labeled with different symbols.

"Uh, you only have to press your finger to the sensor and it will record your unique genetic signature," Tascilo said. "Hold it there for a few seconds because it won't begin to record until after three to help prevent mistakes."

Ming held her finger to the device. It beeped, and an unlabeled twisting model appeared along with some sort of a prompt. Wei Yong couldn't see any way to enter any information, though.

"Speak your name into the sensor, now," Tascilo said.

Ming looked at him warily for a moment, then leaned close to it and said, "Li Yuen Ming." Strange Basic symbols appeared next to her twisty thing, and the device beeped again. Ming handed it to Wei Yong, who recorded his 'signature' and handed it to Kei Sa, who also did and passed it back to Tascilo.

"Very well," Tascilo said. "The supreme chancellor told me that he feels it would be best for you to hold some sort of assembly before you leave—a peace announcement both for your people to celebrate and to show the people of our galaxy a bit of your culture and that you hold us no ill will."

"We should have a parade," Rah Cai Yue said. When Tascilo looked at him, Cai Yue added seriously, "We like parades."

Tascilo laughed, as did most of the rest of the honor guard, but the honor guard nodded also.

"I think there is plenty of space for you to have a parade leading into the Grand Courtyard," Tascilo said.

"When?" asked Ming.

Tascilo was suddenly somber again. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Ming sounded outraged—Wei Yong hoped it was more because it made Tascilo seem that he didn't want them around than because it would hamper her plans for a parade, but he couldn't really tell.

"Yes, that is my bad news," Tascilo said. "Late last night, my sources discovered that there is a group on Coruscant who haven't forgotten about you or forgiven you for the war. They're quite opposed to us letting you leave in peace, and both myself and my sources agree that they could pose a threat."

"Then why don't we leave tonight?" asked Tempest.

"I wish I could let you do that," Tascilo said, "but Palpatine

insists that you must have a public appearance or it will look like we're too embarrassed." The diplomats sitting around the table begin to argue in protest, but Tascilo ignored them and kept talking. Wei Yong's opinion of him rose a little higher. "to even acknowledge that we had a conflict with you. By Palpatine's orders, your ships do not have clearance to leave until after you have had a peace assembly."

"He thought we might want to just leave," Wei Yong said.

"Of course," Tascilo said. "You've said repeatedly that all you want is to go home. Meet Palpatine's request, and you can."

"But we're prisoners until then?"

One of the diplomats tried to speak again. "I wouldn't say."

"Of sorts, yes. But only in the same sense that my sources once were."

Wei Yong thought that was a strange comment, but Tascilo rose to leave before he could fully process it.

"I am afraid that even my security clearance is not high enough to help you. My sources are investigating everything." He finished gathering his things and paused to look Wei Yong in the eyes. "I would recommend you talk to my sources," he said, and quickly left.

And finally Wei Yong caught on to who Tascilo's 'sources' were, or rather, was.

* * *

><p>Honor had been near panic when Tascilo had talked about rebels and their not being able to leave before holding a peace assembly, talking so quickly and consistently in Ming's head that she almost couldn't hear what Tascilo said. Usually when he panicked, he refused to leave her side, so when she realized suddenly, when she reached the guest chambers she had been given, that she could neither feel, nor hear, nor see the Vyrenchi, she nearly panicked herself, thinking he had somehow been trapped or killed--she didn't trust that an energy being was safe in a world where all energy was carefully regulated into a system to distribute power and information. He returned, however, almost immediately after she realized he was gone, and he was quiet.</p>

Too quiet. Usually he greeted her. Never before had his projected image simply stood silently in front of her.

"Honor?" she asked. "Are you all right?"

He didn't answer.

"Honor?"

=We have tragedy.= Honor said.

"Tragedy?"

=Shao Kahn.=

Ming sat down. "What's he done?"

=He has attacked home, Yuen Ming.=

"H-home?" Ming managed, barely able to speak, images of a conquered Mandalore rising.

=Our home, Yuen Ming.=

"Oh," she said, ashamed at her relief. "Viri...I'm soâ€"but it couldn't fall. He could never defeat you."

=He has not, Yuen Ming. He is only just attacking now. We are sorry we are not clearer.=

"No, it's not your fault, Honor." She made herself look confident. "Viri won't fall."

=We do not think so, Yuen Ming, but we must go no matter,= Honor mewled.

"You have to go?" Ming's heart began to beat abnormally hard again.

=We do not want to go. We do not want to abandon you, Yuen Ming.=

"No, Honor, I understand. You have to go save your planet."

=We all do not want to go, but we do not all worry so much about abandoning you, Yuen Ming, so much as we do.=

"No, Honor," Ming said. "You have to go. I'll be fine. We'll all be fine."

Honor's image lowered his head. =We have to go now.=

And he was gone. Ming forced herself not to panic.

* * *

><p>Soon after Braeden returned to his quarters in the Calyaar District, the Mandalorians came to ask him about the investigations he was conducting for Tascilo. It was the fourth time they had tried to find him in an hour; obviously, they were distressed.</p>

He was in the middle of testing crystals when they came, and he was slightly more irritated that he hadn't discovered anything more than Tascilo had told him than he was irritated that he was interrupted. He had been neither able to find any of the group resisting peace with the Mandalorians or find out who any of them were. The fact that he couldn't find any meant that they weren't just a group of harmless civilians trying to exercise their political rights and voice their political opinions. That he couldn't get any names or get pointed in any direction meant that they weren't just a group of low criminals trying to make trouble or make a name for themselves. The Mandalorian resistance group was really a phantom Mandalorian resistance group, but not in the sense that it didn't existâ€"rather, in the sense that

it was the sort of thing that haunted you but couldn't really be seen, revealed only the last moment before it finally killed you.

He didn't tell the Mandalorians what the results of his search meant because he didn't want to panic them, and also because he didn't have anything else to tell them. He suspected everyone. There were crafty criminals who would create the outlines of such a resistance group to drive security mad, but never actually create the group. There were crime lords who would take their prejudices to such a level and actually organize a group that well hidden. There were diplomats he suspected, and military leaders he suspected, and even Palpatine himself, briefly, although based on history, his not wanting to be embarrassed was reason enough for Palpatine to require public exposure of the Mandalorians.

Braeden knew nothing. He told them that. They left.

Or most of them left. Braeden had already begun installing a large red crystal he had bought from a closing museum on the Outer Rim when he realized one of the Mandalorians was still standing in his doorway. It was the one in the coat, who had come to rescue the queen.

"What do you want?" Braeden asked.

The Mandalorian was startled. "Sorry," he said, his voice less accented than it had been the first time Braeden had heard it, a year before in a back-water market. "I was just looking at all the crystals," he explained. "You have a lot of them."

"I'm testing them," Braeden said shortly.

The Mandalorian didn't leave. "Testing them for what?"

Braeden sighed. "To see how well they work in lightsabers."

"Those are your light swords, right?"

He waited for Braeden to answer. Braeden didn't, replacing the casing on the lightsaber he was working on and suddenly igniting it.

"We use crystals in ours, as well," the Mandalorian said, looking at the blade, his voice as calm as his heartbeat. "Sunstones."

"There are no stones on anyone's sun," Braeden said. The crystal was fair. The humming of the blade was strong and steady without the variations or glitches that indicated it would someday short out.

"They're not actually from the sun," the Mandalorian said, a hint of a peevish tone entering his voice. "We just call them that. Well, the Mandalorian version of that, anyway. They're just clear, and very common, and we use themâ€"oh, you have one!" He reached down onto Braeden's table and picked up a quartz stone.

Braeden shut his eyes and shook his head. "We call those quartz. They're worthless. Melt immediately, and no one considers them of any value."

"You just don't know how to use them," the Mandalorian said.

"Here's you, uh, have to open your eyes to see."

Braeden did and saw nothing out of the ordinary. He raised an eyebrow.

"I haven't done it yet," the Mandalorian protested. The stone began to glow--no, more than glow. It emitted a strong light that was much softer than the artificial light in Braeden's quarters, and much quieter--silent, in fact.

"There. Worthless?"

"No," Braeden said, holding out his hand. The Mandalorian placed the stone in it. "Not to you, anyway. It's still worthless to me."

"You don't think you can do that--with your powers, I mean?"

"I didn't even feel you do anything."

"Oh. You can keep that stone, though, and it'll be useful to you."

Braeden set it on the table. "Until it stops glowing."

"It won't," the Mandalorian said.

"Not ever?" Braeden said skeptically.

"Well, when I die," the Mandalorian answered, his tone hinting that the condition was obvious. "But until then, no, unless I turn it off, which I won't. We Mandalorians do this all the time our entire lives. Technically to turn them off, we just have to let them go--no effort involved there, you'd think, but the fact is that it's so easy to keep them going, that even thinking about them to let them go is more effort than keeping them going."

"Really," Braeden said.

"That's not true about our weapons, though. Those take effort. They're not just light. Yen Sa--the youngest one of our honor guard--was the one who figured out how to utilize them to make weapons. I don't know how. If you want to know, you'll have to ask him."

"Yen Sa," Braeden said. "And who are you?"

"Rah Cai Yue. A priest."

"Thank you for the gift, Rah Cai Yue," Braeden said, "but I need to get to work."

"So do I," he answered, heading for the door, happily adding, "We're planning a parade."

* * *

><p>Kei Sa finished writing and placed her pen on the desk in her room. She was alone except for her younger daughter, Ching, who lay quiet but not asleep in her crib, as though she too could sense what Kei Sa did. More likely, she sensed the tension in Kei Sa.</p>

Her husband had gone with the general when most of the honor guard had gone with the queen, planning defenses for the parade and peace assembly rather than the peace assembly itself. Nai Do Xian was the only other one working on defenses; Quy and the lieutenant were the men the general trusted most.

Ming had been anxious when she asked Kei Sa to help her plan, but Kei Sa had been unable to determine why. She decided that her own anxiety was preventing her from being able to help Ming and turned down Ming's request, retreating to her room to try to sort out why she felt the way she did.

An hour later, she was only more troubled, and she gave up trying to determine why, instead deciding to do something to try to relieve her anxiety in some way. She decided to write her husband a letter. She couldn't tell anyone about her feelings because they were all too close to panic anyway. As terrible as it made her feel, she couldn't even tell Quy. He'd tell someone, and then it would be as though she had told.

But she could write him a letter, and it would be almost like talking to him. She could tell him everything she wanted to say to him if she never got a chance to speak to him again, and leave it with her daughter, where he would be sure to find it.

It took her two hours to decide what she wanted to say, how best to say it, and finally write it down. Looking over at Ching as she folded the letter, she realized that she had three more to write.

36. III

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

III.

* * *

><p>The Mandalorian colonists loved the parade. If it had been held on Mandalore anywhere other than the smallest of villages, it would have been laughable. The army and the honor guard hadn't brought much of anything decorative—the queen's dress was proof of that—and most of the little bit the colonists had brought had been destroyed or sold sometime since they left Mandalore. There was some left—all people's personal things—and it had almost all been donated to be used in the parade. The Republic donated nothing.<p>

They didn't have the people to put on a parade, either. All of the colonists were in the parade, but few of them were the usual talents. Some were good enough acrobats to do some tricks, and the few children were certainly happy to dance around in what passed for costumes. Their biggest find had been someone good enough to sing—there was a woman among the colonists named Hsu Lin who had been in the opera, which annoyed the queen and made Rah Cai Yue laugh, for some reason.

The honor guard, for the most part, were dressed in their uniforms.

Kei Sa was dressed in her white split dress, the general in his dress armor, and the queen in the fanciest dress she had brought. The bottom-most layer was black, with long, widening sleeves and a large dragon embroidered in silver at the bottom, right-hand corner. Over it was a green wrap, tied with a darker green belt and cut diagonally from just below her right hip to below her left knee to leave the dragon visible. She also wore a thick, sleeveless cloak of a very deep green, on the back of which was a large, embroidered silver circle with a water dragon inside—her family's symbol. Her face was painted white with only a slight accent to her eyes and her lips colored. The bottom half of her hair was braided, and the top half was pulled back into a bun. Marking the separation was a silver circlet with a miniature of her family's symbol dangling on her forehead, and coming up from the bun was a small, dark green fan with a Mandalorian poem for peace written on it in silver. She was beautiful, but the both her dress and her hair were far more simple than they would have been had this been a royal parade on Mandalore.

The strangest thing about the parade to Tempest, however, was that it was inside. All the sounds echoed rather than carried, and the colors seemed off in the harsh artificial lights rather than glowing as they should in the sunlight. The ceilings in some places restricted the acrobats, and they went through stretches of narrow hallways in which there were no Republic spectators.

The people were happy, though, and he couldn't help but smile.

They finally entered the Grand Courtyard, and the number of Republic spectators made it clear to Tempest that everyone they had run into in the hallways were those who couldn't fit in the Courtyard. A small square in front of the balcony was empty, and the Mandalorian colonists quickly filled it up. All that was left of the parade as it continued up the stairs to the balcony was the honor guard.

If Tempest thought walking into the Grand Courtyard from ground-level was intimidating, it was nothing to the view he found from the balcony. After the Mandalorians filed into the space left for them, there was no space left in the courtyard. It was entirely filled with people of innumerable species, all their faces looking up at them.

Tempest swallowed and looked at the queen. If she was nervous, she hid it well, her posture perfect and her expression calm. As he watched her step forward toward the edge of the balcony, a tiny movement he saw out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Why he noticed the tiny movement when there were nine other people on the balcony, none of which was being entirely still, he had to attribute to years of being a ninja.

Vendetta had subtly nodded.

As Tempest stepped forward instinctively, he could see the distinct trails of people moving through the crowd, heading from the outskirts closer to the balcony. As he began to pull the queen down and put himself in front of her, a bolt of red light erupted from one of the trail-makers in the crowd.

* * *

><p>Braeden had to admit that the much-touted (by the Mandalorians, anyway) Mandalorian parade was almost worth watching. He had seen parades before, by so many different cultures that he couldn't remember them all, and it was unique enough (he had never seen anything like the woman singing in strange costume) to stand out, but still remained a recognizable parade, unlike so many he had seen, mostly from the insect cultures. Insect species had a sentience so very unlike other species' that it was usually hard to understand them at all.</p>

Partially because the parade was almost likable and partially because he felt a certain amount of responsibility to the Mandaloriansâ€"unfortunate side effect of being their rescuerâ€"he, for once, wasn't annoyed to be in the Grand Courtyard on Coruscant, surrounded by three times as many people as ought to be allowed in the space.

He was also almost interested to hear what the queen would have to say to everyone. If he were her, he would have stood up there on the balcony and spoken her own language so only the tiny area of her people could understand her, and end the whole thing with a tiny passage in Basicâ€"something like, "We came in peace; we leave in peace; it's your fault we weren't here entirely in peace." Being a queen, however, she probably actually had learned rules of public speaking and diplomacy to follow them, not to make fun of them.

Braeden never got to hear what she was going to say, however. She never got to say it.

He sensed the sudden threatâ€"it was strong enough to turn the trickle of the force he let through into a gush of awarenessâ€"the same moment that everything seemed to happen. Sudden movement in the crowd, sudden movement on the balcony. He made his own sudden movements just as a blaster bolt shot out from one of the areas of disturbance in the crowd. It was, no doubt, aimed at the queen, but it instead hit one of the honor guard, one of the older ones, in the head. The queen was somewhere behind, and hopefully, below.

The woman who was not the queen was moving the next moment, jumping off the balcony and grabbing a banner to lessen her velocity as she slid to the ground, landing in a roll. She was up and after the assailant the moment her feet hit the ground again, easy to track in her white dress as she easily killed him and the next who came after her.

Braeden slid his way through the crowd with considerably less ease than the Mandalorian woman in white, trying to get to her side to help defeat the attackers that seemed to appear one after another as she defeated them. No one would move out of his way. He couldn't even find a gap large enough to ignite his lightsaber in, after which he hoped people would recognize him for what he wasâ€"a defenderâ€"and stop panicking long enough to get out of his way.

And where were those who were supposed to be defending? Braeden, unable to move effectively anyway, stopped for a moment to look around. There should have been an entire detail of guards around, but they seemed to have vanished. He looked to the balcony to see what the honor guard was doing. Most of them had disappeared, but he didn't look for them. He saw, instead, the queen. She was kneeling by

the front wall of the balcony, cautiously lifting her head up to look down into the crowd. Her white face paint was speckled with red spots and a hole in the middle of the fan on her head was still smoking.

He followed her line of sight to see an open patch in the crowd where the woman in white stood resignedly with her hands lowered and her eyes closed, a blaster held to her head by a man Braeden recognized as a rather controversialâ€"though not so much as heâ€"Jedi.

The traitorous Jedi fired the second shot, and the second Mandalorian fell. It was neither the last shot nor the last Mandalorian.

* * *

><p>The shot into the balcony had an effect on the honor guard that Rah Cai Yue could only describe as startling them into action. They didn't stop to examine the effects of the shot, terrible as they were, and be delayed by the death of one of their members. They sprang into action immediately, Kei Sa doing the literal springing as she jumped off the balcony, and the rest running for the stairs. Cai Yue hesitated to leave Ming where she had fallen, with Tempest's body in her lap and was the last to reach the stairs when he was stopped by a thought.</p>

Would they all be standing uselessly on the balcony if it was the first death of a member? He was disgusted by the thought because he had thought it, and that was when he heard Ming's scream.

He rushed back to the balcony where she was still on the floor but away from where she had fallen. He crawled over to her so as to be hidden by the balcony wall like she was and was shocked by the sounds coming from the courtyardâ€"many shots of their light weapons and so many screams.

"What's happened?" he asked Ming.

"K-Kei Sa," she whispered.

"What?"

"She's dead."

Cai Yue felt his jaw hanging open and wondered how long it had been that way. "Come on," he said, pulling at Ming's arm. "We have to go."

She didn't respond, only blinking her eyes, which looked more like walnuts than their usual almonds.

He began to pull her toward the door, nearly dragging her, which, he had time to muse, was extremely hard to do when one was crawling, the fact of which was what gave him time to realize it.

When he got her to the chamber behind the balcony, where they couldn't be seen, he pulled her to her feet, and she responded enough to run if he pulled her in the right direction. He ran down a hall and reached a crossing with three others. He turned right and hoped that he knew where he was going. Five steps down that hall, he was grabbed from behind.

After he nearly died of fright, he turned to see Yen Sa.

"Other way, other way, come on," Yen Sa said and helped him to pull Ming down the hallway opposite the one he had chosen. "Braeden Leer is keeping the attackers busy—most of them, anyway—in the courtyard, and they sent me to find you, so good thing I showed up when I did or you two would be lost, because I was going to the balcony, and if you'd turned a corner, I would never have found you, and you obviously wouldn't have found the ship, but I'm supposed to be putting up a light shield, so I better start, shouldn't I?"

He didn't even take a gasp for breath before he let go of Ming and began to concentrate—Cai Yue was impressed.

They reached the landing pad where the Mandalorian ships were in less than a minute to find that it was essentially a slaughtering ground. Laser bolts came from somewhere to strike down anyone who wasn't hiding, like the civilians trying to run into ships. Seeing the situation, Cai Yue could only be happy that the shooters seemed to be far away because they were very inaccurate. But people died anyway.

Yen Sa squeezed his eyes shut, and the laser bolts began to disappear at the perimeter of the landing pad. The honor guard stood up and motioned for the civilians to run to the ships. Nai Do Xian headed immediately for the Templar. Do Xian was the only pilot who didn't stay with his ship at all times, so Cai Yue was relieved to see that all three ships would be able to take off as soon as everyone was loaded.

Yen Sa didn't move, so Cai Yue dragged Ming back toward him with his right arm to grab Yen Sa's arms with his left. He dragged them both toward the Templar.

Ming suddenly stopped and pulled him the other way. Cai Yue almost fell over and took the other two with him.

"No, not the Aria!" she yelled. All that remained of the honor guard looked at her questioningly as Yen Sa began to tremble.
"Look—it's the closest. It's probably already full. We have time to make it to the next, now."

Hua Quy Ling, holding his baby and some paper and looking shell-shocked, nodded. "She's right. It is full."

Li Wei Yong turned to him, looking questioningly at the baby. "You gave up your spot for someone else?"

"No," Quy Ling said. "There are letters. One for Ming."

"Now?" Wei Yong asked.

Quy Ling made a sort of strangled noise and held them out. Rah Cai Yue recognized Kei Sa's handwriting.

So did Li Wei Yong, who nodded. And Ming, who took hers with a shaking hand.

Yen Sa spoke, his voice strained. "Hurry, please?"

The honor guard was again startled into action, running to the next ship. They climbed aboard the ship, the last of the survivors, and Yen Sa promptly collapsed. Cai Yue wanted to stay and make sure he was going to be all right, but he had to go make a portal. He ran to the bridge, the rest of the honor guard behind him, wanting, he supposed, to at least see their killers should they die before Cai Yue's portal opened.

Cai Yue paid no attention to them, or to the chatter of a few civilians who had pushed their way onto the bridge. He had to make a portal for home, and he had to make it fast.

And he had to make it without Kei Sa.

He found it surprisingly simple. Either Kei Sa had never really helped, which he doubted, making dozens of portals had adjusted him to the process, which he figured was logical, or using Yen Sa's light swords had enhanced his strength of mind, which he thought was possible.

Or panic was his new best friend, which he thought the most likely of all.

In any case, he got the portal open long before he thought he could, which only enabled him to open his eyes just in time to see the Templar explode spectacularly.

* * *

><p>It was hard to compare losses. Which was more traumatic? Which had the greater magnitude of suffering or other profound things he ought to be thinking?</p>

Zhen couldn't decide. On the one hand, his best friend had died. On the other, lots of people he didn't know but who symbolized him in a wayâ€"his cultureâ€"had just died.

It didn't compare. He couldn't compare it. He just knew he felt bad, but in a different way. Sort of numb rather than hit in the stomach by a cannonball.

The rest of the honor guard looked like they felt as numb as he did, except Chen Yi, who was pale and shaking and leaking out tears against his will. He'd sent An into the Templar to await him. Now she was dead. Now they wouldn't get married like everyone except them knew they were going to.

He guessed they weren't going to get married, after all.

Three of the honor guard dead in one day. It was terrible, really. Especially since one of them was the one who wasn't supposed to die.

Kei Sa was invincible. She was supposed to be invincible.

It wasn't fair. Everything had gone sour at once. If Shao Kahn hadn't attacked Viri (Shao Kahn's being active being a very bad thing), no one would have died (another very bad thing).

That was two. It worried him that according to his grandmother there should be an upcoming third bad thing.

Just as there had been three honor guard deaths.

Which just wasn't fair. Why only three of the honor guard when so many of the civilians had died? Wouldn't it be fairer to be proportional? If the guard couldn't protect them, they should at least die at the same rate as them. They should die at a higher rate. They were the ones who had chosen to put their lives on the line for the defense of others. They should all be dead.

And why was he even thinking these things?

It just didn't compare.

"Umm...Cai Yue?" Yen Sa asked, and Zhen jumped.

As did Cai Yue, who looked even more numb than Zhen felt.

"What?" he asked.

Yen Sa stood up and looked out the viewport of the ship. "I thought you took us home."

"Yeah," Cai Yue said.

"To Mandalore?"

"That is our home, yes."

"Right to Mandalore?"

"Yeah. Like I told Braeden. I know where it is, I just don't know where it is."

"Then," Yen Sa paused. "Where is it?"

Zhen looked out the viewport. All he saw were stars, and he was about to shake his head at Cai Yue's thick-headedness when he suddenly realized that, for the first time in a long time, they were very familiar stars.

37. IV

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

IV.

* * *

><p>In a dank and gloomy cave, Shang Tsung knelt, wishing that, among other things, the cave wasn't quite so dank and gloomy. Or that it wasn't it a cave at all. He preferred palaces, himself, but he wasn't the master.<p>

The master lay on his pallet, lazily pointing a sharp, gold-covered finger at the ceiling. Standing on one side of him, on the dais, was

Shao Kahn. Hunched on the other side of him, on the floor, was the one they called succubus, an old witch, if she could even be called a witch anymore. Tsung had her powers. She didn't much like him. He didn't much care.

You have not done as you promised, the demon master said. The witch cackled.

Tsung rolled his eyes at the floor, which he knew the demon couldn't see, and managed to refrain from sighing, which he knew the demon would hear. "It is not my fault, Master, that the Jedi proved to be an insufficient foe for the Mandalorians. I had every assurance that they could match anythingâ€" "

"We are not concerned about the Mandalorians," Kahn interrupted. "They were sufficiently distracted by your plot, and are no longer any concern of mine."

"Of yours?" Tsung asked. "What about mine? What about our master's?" He turned his attention back to the demon. "We would be much better off if they were all gone. Palpatine promised that they would all be gone."

"You promised Palpatine that the Mandalorians would take care of his problem as well as the Jedi took care of ours," Kahn said. "He is not happy."

"Palpatine?" Tsung asked. "What does he matter? He can't get to us, and if he could, he couldn't hurt us anyway."

"He will not be willing to allow us into his space again," Kahn said. "We had all hoped for more space."

"Let's finish up with the space we have before we go hunting for more. And you tell Palpatine, that he ought to be on his hands and knees thanking meâ€" "

The witch cackled again. Tsung was beginning to be annoyed.

"You," Kahn said, "should be on your hands and knees thanking Palpatine for what he's accomplished. And Vendetta. They arranged everything."

"I agree that they were very discreet in arranging to have reports of clones on either side get to the other and stir everything up, but have we all forgotten that this was all my idea? They wouldn't have done anything if it weren't for me!"

The witch shrieked with laughter.

"Palpatine had more to do with this than you," Kahn said. "He got his government to declare war for next to nothing. He even sent one his strongest followersâ€"his own apprenticeâ€"to kill that mind-witch, the queen's handmaiden. No one but a strong Jedi with a strong mind could have gotten close enough to her."

"But it was my idea," Tsung whined. "The clones idea was brilliant!"

"Palpatine does not agree," wheezed the witch, grinning. "And neither

do I. I think you ought to get your own ideas."

"It was my idea!" Tsung shouted at her.

"Clones," she muttered, and spat on the ground.

"Palpatine," said Kahn, "wanted the slaughter of the Mandalorians to be equaled by the slaughter of the Jedi. Many fewer Jedi were killed than the troops he intended to use on his side. He's down allies and not down enemies. I'm sure you see the problem."

Tsung gritted his teeth. "That is hardly my fault. The plan fell apart on his end. Surely he was supposed to take care of one of his own generals and that renegade Jedi. Everything I did was perfect."

"Your plan was not perfect," Kahn said. "The master and I are agreed. Your youth will not be restored. We see no cause for reward."

The witch laughed. Tsung shivered.

The master turned his head at last, looking Tsung straight in the eyes.

Lucky for you, the demon said, *the Mandalorian threat has been neutralized.*

Tsung let out his breath. "Edenia is ours. At last."

It will be.

* * *

><p>The Queen's Honor Guard had stared and argued over the stars, or rather, over one star. Or even more accurately, over a planet. It was a funny argument, though, Ming thought, since they all seemed to be arguing the same point. It wasn't Viri. They were in the wrong spot.<p>

After her husband felt they had wasted enough time, he ordered Cai Yue to make a portal to Edenia, and she could tell from the way he swallowed afterward that he had refrained from adding the uncalled-for, and possibly untrue, barb: if you know where it is.

Cai Yue was tired, more tired than any of them save Yen Sa, and they were all tired. Tired from the fight, but mostly tired from the loss. Adrenaline and fear had worn off, and they were stuck with considerably more heavy dread and sorrow, weight that she could feel in the pit of her stomach. She felt sorry for him, holding onto his chair to keep himself on his feet as he created the portal.

It wasn't Viri. Yen Sa spouted astronomical statistics that no one else understood.

At least Kei Sa's baby didn't cry. Their nerves couldn't have handled the noise, and none of them were in any shape to calm an infant. She was worried for Quy Ling, though. He didn't cry either, just held Ching Sa and stared at the letters. He was never the sort who would show his emotions in public. She hoped once they landed and he was

alone that he would allow himself to grieve.

She had a letter, too. The way Quy Ling was looking at them, she was surprised he gave it to her. She wasn't sure he would ever open his.

It wasn't Viri.

Edenia was right where it was supposed to be. Their landing was rough. The pilot of the ship they were on wasn't nearly as good as Lieutenant Nai had been. He had always landed the ship like she was taught to set her teacup down.

If he had known how to fight in a ship, and if the ship had had weapons, he would have destroyed everyone. He was a good shot, and experienced. But they'd lost their advantage when they had left the ground.

They had lost their advantage when the Vyrenchi had left.

And Viri was there? But not Mandalore?

It wasn't Viri.

Because the Vyrenchi had left. They'd been able to leave, to go home, to help.

It wasn't Viri. It couldn't be Viri.

Her brother was there when they got off the ship into the heat. Her brother, his wife, their new-born daughter (pale like her mother), her child.

Her brother was there, and she saw his first words on his face before he spoke.

It was Viri.

* * *

><p>Three hours after the Mandalorians arrived in their home galaxy, Li Wei Yong sat with his wife in an Edenian crystal-garden, nearly unable to breathe between the heat and the grief.</p>

Three hours before they had been fleeing for their lives. It seemed like that was an entirely different life that Wei Yong had. That was when he was General of the Armies of Mandalore.

Mandalore had been gone for almost an entire day. According to the Edenians, Shao Kahn had launched an attack on Viri to gather all the Vyrenchi to their home planet. He then launched a swift, simultaneous attack against Mandalore. With the bulk of the Mandalorian army and all of the honor guard far from home, Mandalore was defenseless. It fell within an hour, and now existed as only another fragment of Kahn's domain, Outworld. Skirmishes still broke out on Viri from time to time, just enough to keep them paranoid.

Yuen Jer Rod contained his grief with resolute self-control , as befit a leader. His sister didn't.

Well, Wei Yong thought, looking at her seated form, her grief was fairly well contained, but she wasn't under control. She was crushed, and he didn't mean that in the clichéd way. This was beyond clichéd. She had been thrown into such a crevasse by the news that he wasn't sure he could even see her anymore.

She wasn't having any sort of fit. He'd heard of people having fits before—"catatonia", he thought it was called. Ming wasn't. He knew she could hear him, and he knew she could see him. She just wouldn't respond.

Emperor Yuen had told them the news as gently as he could, but no amount of tact could have made the news any gentler. Ming had let her hair down immediately as she walked to the palace, emerging from her room only after she had been brought a simple, entirely white dress and a white embroidered veil to wear. She had then walked straight past her son without acknowledging him.

Sindel and Wei Yong had stared in shock at each other. Sindel, always a quick thinker, had nodded at Wei Yong to follow Ming and hurriedly placed Kitana (her infant girl whose name reminded Wei Yong of swords and cats) on a chair and picked up Nei Jen, trying to distract him before he realized what had happened. The boy was also quick, though, and had understood and begun to cry. Wei Yong was torn between following Ming like Sindel had told him to and taking the child, but when Sindel shushed the boy almost without effort, he realized that he probably found his sitter much more comforting than his parents after their long absence.

When he got to the garden, Ming was sitting with a rod-straight back, presumably crying silently under her veil. He sat next to her, unsure what to do.

"Ming," he said. She didn't respond. "Ming, I'm here." Still no response. He was afraid to touch her, and he didn't know why.

He sighed. "Ming, it's awful, I know, but..."

You have to keep it together; you have a people to lead? That reason no longer worked.

"Ming, you have a child who needs to see you. He hasn't seen his parents in more than a year..."

But if that were true, if Nei Jen was more important than anything else, he should be with his son.

"Ming, our world is gone, and our people are gone, but...we have to keep fighting. We can't surrender or they'll have won."

And now he sounded like an insane general. Besides, which, the Mandalorians had already lost. There was nothing left to fight for.

He was a general without an army. She was a queen without a people. They'd been defined by their positions by so long, that without them...

He felt paper-thin.

He stopped talking. The silence thickened in the heat. Wei Yong knew he had to do something; Ming had to hear something, but he couldn't think of what to say. He let his breath out in relief when Yuen Jer Rod entered the garden. He always knew what to say.

Jer Rod knelt down in front of Ming. "I know this is the hardest of news, sister, but you must find it within yourself to be strong. You must grieve. I know you must, and I also grieve. But you must be strong. Show your strength for the good of the Mandalorian people. You are still the leader."

Ming began to sob.

Wei Yong put his face in his hands and sighed.

Jer Rod seemed to be lost, for once. He stood and began to pace the garden.

At least his shoes were hard, so the footsteps kept the silence at bay.

Listening to Jer Rod's footsteps as he was, he heard the others approaching from farther away than he thought he was capable of. He was also impressed by his ability to pick out three entirely separate gaits.

Sindel arrived in the entrance to the garden, breathing hard and looking determined. She looked back to the hall behind her and nodded. Rah Cai Yue stepped hesitantly beside her, his slightly raised eyebrow giving him a lost look. He sniffed and wiped his nose. Hua Quy Ling stepped behind him, still looking at the letters he held in his hand, his steps slow and forced.

Cai Yue saw Ming and lunged forward. He sat down beside her and grabbed her hands, shaking them a little.

"Ming?"

She didn't answer him either.

"Ming, it's not your fault," said Cai Yue, and Wei Yong felt instantly stupid. That's what he should have said. Wasn't it obvious?

"Ming, you didn't know," Cai Yue continued. "It's not your fault. It's terrible, and it hurts, I know how much it hurts. We all know how much it hurts. But it's not your fault. It's nobody's fault but Evil's."

She turned her head to look at him, and Wei Yong felt as though someone had taken a sword to the paper he'd become.

"Not my fault?" she said, her voice low and hard, "How is it not my fault?"

"We were tricked, Ming. We were all tricked."

"No, it was my fault if it was anyone's. I'm the one who kept us there. I'm the one who got us into that war, and how many people died?"

Cai Yue shook his head. "This wasâ€"we were tricked. The clones thing? It had to have been planned; Tascilo was rightâ€" "

"How many people, Cai Yue?" she said, much louder. "How many?"

"A-a couple hundred, Ming, but it's notâ€" "

"That's how many colonists, Cai Yue." She paused. "How many worlds?" she asked, her voice suddenly high and trembling.

"Ming, it's notâ€" "

"It's not all over, my queen," Hua Quy Ling interrupted.

"Close enough," she said.

"No," he said. "And we have not lost all hope yet."

"Hope?" She looked up at him. "What about hope? We've lost Mandalore."

"And faith," Quy continued.

"Faith," Ming repeated without inflection.

"Yes." He looked down at the letters in his hand and back up. "We weren't aboard the Templar when it was destroyed. Was there a real reason for that?"

"It was full," Ming said.

"We would have fit, had we boarded," he said. "My child was not aboard the Templar. Was there a real reason for that?"

"You had lettersâ€" "

"Letters that needed to be delivered in the middle of a firefight?"

Ming lowered her head again.

"Kei Sa would want us to have faith," Quy continued more softly, rubbing the letter with his thumb. "She knew."

For the first time, Wei Yong noticed that he had opened it.

"What?" said Ming.

"Not precisely," Quy said. "But she knew."

He turned to leave, then turned back.

"Read your letter, my queen."

He left. Cai Yue stood and after a last look at Ming, followed him. Sindel smiled slightly, then took her husband's arm and let him lead her out of the garden.

Wei Yong turned to Ming and reached out to touch her shoulder. She

stood up.

"It's hot out here," she said. "I'm going to go read my letter."

He wondered how it was he could be outside and need to go find fresh air.

38. V

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

V.

* * *

><p>During all those months living on a ship, Ming thought she would be overjoyed to go outside again. She had planned to spend her first night outside, sleeping on the grass, under stars that she knew by heartâ€"stars in which she could point out all her favorite constellations. She never thought she'd spend her first night huddled on a tiny bed in the forward room on the starboard side of a starship, with the sole window, a circle with a diameter smaller than the span of her hand, glowing yellow from the harsh light of an Edenian sunset.<p>

But that was when there was a Mandalore. The irony of its being gone was that the sorrow caused her to need it all the more. But if she couldn't have Mandalore, she needed something familiar. And a tiny bed in the forward room on the starboard side of a starship, even if she didn't know whose room this had been, had become far more familiar than the plush and sparkling Edenian palace, gems in every room.

Kei Sa's letter lay on the rumpled bedding, the crispness of the parchment making it retain a flatness even amongst the folds. She had read eight words of it. Li Yuen Ming, my queen and my friendâ€"

She couldn't get past those words. She had only had two friends in her life, two true friends, though so very different. Kei Sa had always been there to help her. Had Ming ever helped Kei Sa? Did she deserve to be considered a friend?

Li Yuen Ming, my queen and my friendâ€"

Kei Sa certainly didn't care, but Kei Sa had been raised to never think of herself. And somewhere along the line, Cai Yue had learned not to. Ming had never learned; had Kei Sa ever cared how selfish she was?

She forced herself to read the next word, and whereas the salutation had thrown her backward, Kei Sa's resignation pulled her in.

I hope against hope that you will never receive this letter, that the parade will go as planned and I shall burn this letter when we return to our home, to our people. I fear it shall not be so. My dreams tell me it shall not be so._

Ming, I shall protect you at cost of anything, not because I have pledged to do so, but because you have been a part of my life since the time that I feel my life began, and you have always treated me with kindness and with love. I feel I love you as much as I love anyone and as much as anyone loves you, but I feel I also know you as well as anyone knows you.

Do not blame yourself for what evil has done to you. To linger in your guilt is a weakness, and you have proven yourself so very strong.

Ming, I beg you to remember the duality in your nature, the duality that has haunted you for your entire life. You have learned to juggle well; I pray you don't forget how to be yourself if the world you know vanishes.

You are the ruler of Mandalore, but you are more than a ruler. You are the symbol of Mandalore every bit as much as the dragon. But you are more than just a symbol. You are Mandalore. When people look at you, they see our entire people. I am not only writing of those who are not Mandalorian. I speak also of our own people. When you are strong, we see ourselves as strong, and we are strong. When you are weak, we are weak. I know you despise this, but it is true.

But, Ming, I know you are not only our ruler. You are a woman. You must also balance yourself, your husband, and your child. I know you find this distasteful as well, but it is who you are, and you cannot escape it. You are not allowed the luxury of thinking only of yourself as men are, and you are not allowed the luxury of thinking only of yourself as common people are.

Please, Ming, I've previewed the horror to come, but I beg you, stay strong, and stay sensitive. And please, watch after my girls. I feel they are special.

Your ever-loving servant and friend, Hua Kei Sa.

Ming picked the letter up and folded it carefully, creasing it only when she had lined the corners up perfectly, then rubbing her thumbnail along the crease to flatten it. She picked a hard-bound book off the compartment's shelves and placed the letter inside. She slammed the book shut and rubbed her thumb along the spine.

Navigation and the Fifth Dimension: Avoiding Disorientation in a Worm Hole. So this had been the pilot's compartment.

On a shelf under the window was a bowl of water. She dipped her hands into it and gently washed them, even Edenia's sun not transmitting warmth through the thick glass. Or rather, not glass. She wasn't sure what it was, but it had never been glass.

She pulled her hands out of the water and reached for a towel. When she turned back to the window, the light had turned blood red. She dropped the towel when the floor began to shake beneath her.

* * *

><p>Tieh Chen Yi stood in front of the palace, staring at the sky in horror as it faded from red to indigo. The wind picked up, and the ground began to tremble, and people came running from everywhere.<p>

He thought he had seen chaos before. Some of the markets on the planets the Mandalorians had visited had been chaotic. Some of the wrecks of their colonies, the parade. He had thought they were chaos.

This was chaos. Edenian soldiers ran out of the palace. Kitsune guards ran into the palace. Civilians ran to their homes, to the now-emptied barracks to try to fetch the army, to the palace, to the sole Mandalorian ship that was overflow from the shipyards into the area beyond the courtyard.

And that was before the armies came, falling from an enormous rift in the sky, the ugly cousin of Cai Yue's portal. Ugly behemoth cousin.

He recognized the soldiers at once as those of Shao Kahn: mutants, Shokans, now even Centaurions, all dressed in ragged armor that varied from clan to clan. They had fought off invasions just like this one before. The Mandalorians and the Vyrenchi.

Neither were here to protect Edenia. Edenia was going to fall.

Tieh Chen Yi raised his left hand and ignited his dark yellow light weapons.

"We have time, yet," General Li suddenly shouted from behind him.

Chen Yi whirled. "What, General?" he yelled back, the wind gusting in his ears and lightning cracking above him.

"The portal is distant. We won't have to fight for a while yet. We need to organize ourselves."

"Organize ourselves for fighting," Chen Yi said flatly, disbelieving.

"No, organize ourselves for running," the general replied.

"We're running?" Zhen Feng Qui asked as he ran up to them.

"Yes, of course," the general answered.

"Oh, good," Zhen said.

"This look like a good place for a portal?" Rah Cai Yue asked as he joined them.

"Good as any," the general said. "Get to work."

Rah Cai Yue closed his eyes, and they made a circle around him. Hua Quy Ling and Yen Sa arrived from opposite directions, and took their places around the circle.

"A portal?" asked Yen Sa. "Where to?"

"Earth," the general. "It's protected from Kahn."

"Mortal Kombat," Hua Quy Ling said. "He has to win a

tournament."

"Well, why didn't they do that here?" Zhen asked. "I'm good at tournaments."

"Quickly, now," the general said quietly, rubbing his hands together. "The portal won't be done before the armies get here. That means our priority is protecting Cai Yue. We also need someplace to gather people to keep them safe untilâ€""

"We need our children," Quy Ling said.

The general's mouth hung open, and he blinked. "Our children. I'd completelyâ€""

"You haven't had one around like I have," Quy Ling reassured him.

"Okay, we'll go get our childrenâ€""

"I'll come, too," Zhen said.

The general nodded. "We three will go. You twoâ€"" he pointed at Chen Yi and Yen Sa, "â€"protect Rah Cai Yue." He stopped and took a deep breath. "But we still need somewhere to keep people safe. Somewhere very well protected, so they don't get slaughtered while they're waiting on the portal."

"If we set up a base somewhere, that line from the base to the portal is going to be a focus for attack," Chen Yi said. "It'll be like a slaughterhouse. Unless we can pick up our base and push it through the portalâ€""

They all turned to look at the ship. The queen was slowly descending the ramp, looking worse, if that was possible.

"Ming, get back in the ship!" the general yelled. "Now!" She obeyed, and the honor guard reformed its circle.

"Everyone clear?" asked the general.

They nodded.

"Let's go."

Hua Quy Ling and the general sprinted toward the palace. Zhen took a few steps, then turned back around.

"Yen Sa," he said, ignited his light spear. "Just in case I never see you again, I really like these weapons you made us." He turned and took a few more steps, then turned back around. "Just thought you should know."

With his long strides, it didn't take him long to catch up to the general and Hua Quy Ling.

Chen Yi watched them enter the palace, then turned to Yen Sa and nodded.

"You ready for this?" Yen Sa asked.

"No," Chen Yi said. "I just meant I like these weapons, too."

"Oh." Yen Sa swallowed and turned away.

* * *

><p>As he watched the fighting grow closer, Yen Sa was reminded of the last battle they had fought before leaving to save the colonists. It was somewhat fitting, the first battle after so closely resembling the last battle before so that it seemed things had stopped while they were away and waited for them to come back to pick them up again.</p>

But things hadn't stopped. They moved forward, irreversibly. And the battle only seemed nearly identical from afar. There were Edenians in the place of Mandalorians, and the Centaurions fought alongside the Shokans and mutants.

And they were going to lose.

Yen Sa didn't feel like fighting. If anything came near the portal, he would have to. It was their only hope of survival. But things had changed so completely that he felt he had been cracked and would have to be remolded.

He heard a shout, and saw Vendetta run toward him. Vendetta hadn't bothered to remold himself after the death of Emperor Yuen, and he'd always seemed to not quite fit as a result. Possibly he was made of something harder than Yen Sa--something brittle that couldn't change its shape without shattering or being chipped away. Granite.

Yen Sa felt more like putty.

And he didn't feel like fighting.

"What a horror," Vendetta said, as he reached Yen Sa, glancing to Cai Yue, whose eyes were shut and who was sweating, and to the burgeoning portal, the dark energy steadily pulsing and collapsing, but gaining a little size each time. It would only be a matter of minutes, and then the exodus would begin. Or, at least, he hoped enough people would escape for it to be considered an exodus.

Yen Sa began to nod, but he froze, seeing, of all things, children. Lost children. A small Edenian girl was crying as soldiers rushed past furiously, and a little beyond her, an older Edenian boy, but still far too young to fight, clutched a box and looked around for someplace to go.

"Children," he said, feeling stupid immediately afterward that he hadn't thought of it before. He turned to Vendetta sharply. "Take my place here," he said. "Guard the portal, while I get the children. Direct anyone who comes here into the ship to wait for the portal."

"Absolutely," Vendetta said, but Yen Sa barely heard him as he headed for the girl. He ran to her and knelt down.

"Come with me," he said.

She babbled back at him. She only spoke Edenian.

He picked her up, and, surprisingly, she didn't struggle, as though even a stranger taking her couldn't be worse than standing alone in the chaos.

The boy was quite a ways from him, moving away from him. Yen Sa shouted at him, but he was not surprised when the boy didn't turn. Who could discern one yell from another? He began to walk toward the boy, noticing that the battle was fast approaching.

The boy moved toward an arch. Yen Sa guessed he was trying to find shelter any way he could. Yen Sa shouted at him again, and this time, the boy moved. He jumped backward, and then he fell, motionless.

Yen Sa stumbled backward and nearly dropped the girl. As he regained his balance, he noticed the shadows continued to move after he stopped, then quickly settled.

The ships engines fired behind him. He turned and ran as well as he could with the girl's weight bouncing against him. As he passed a side entrance to the palace, an Edenian boy stepped into the doorway. Yen Sa ran toward him and grabbed his hand.

The ship was through the portal before he got back to it. The ship was through, and the queen was safe. Apparently someone with at least rudimentary flying skills had made his way aboard.

Yen Sa hesitated in front of the portal. Vendetta nodded at him. Cai Yue was still, his fists clenched so his knuckles whitened.

"I'll be back," Yen Sa said, then picked up the boy and stepped through the portal.

Its force flung him to the ground in the middle of a field. He stumbled but kept his balance.

The ship was landing a short way from the portal. Yen Sa set the children down to the side.

"Stay here," he said, in the best Edenian he could muster, which wasn't very good. "Safe here." He pointed to the portal. "No touch."

They nodded at him, wide-eyed, and he jumped back through the portal. It was much easier to keep his balance on exit without extra weight making him top-heavy. He ran past Vendetta. There had to be more children.

But he couldn't see any. He whirled around, scouting, but he couldn't see anything. Any children out in the open were in more danger, but maybe there were no more. Maybe they were all inside. And even children inside would have no hope when Shao Kahn completed taking over the planet. He started for the courtyard of the palace.

He almost tripped over her.

At least, he guessed it was a her, from the ribbons tied in what little hair she had. A fat, healthy baby, lying in a bassinet in the middle of an empty courtyard. A fat, healthy, Mandalorian baby.

He picked up the bassinet, and she smiled at him. And with screams and the clang of swords becoming ever louder from the west, Yen Sa smiled back at her.

Rushing back to the portal, he saw the first mutant break through a fast-decreasing row of Edenian soldiers. Vendetta swung his swordâ€"a metal oneâ€"in an upward arc, and Yen Sa was through the portal.

He landed wrong, so he twisted himself so he would land on his back, the bassinet on top of him. He wrenched his ankle and lay on the ground, hissing in pain with every breath in and out. The baby cooed as her bassinet moved up and down in time with his hissing.

The bassinet rose off his chest suddenly, and Yen Sa opened his eyes to see the queen setting it gently on the ground. He sat up, and pushed himself to his feet. He tried to hobble to the portal, but the queen spoke for the first time he'd heard since their arrival on Edenia, and he knew she was right.

"No."

* * *

><p>The atrium of the Edenian palace was empty and silent. Compared to the Edenian heat outside, it even seemed chilly. A precursor of the ghost world that was to come, Hua Quy Ling thought.</p>

The change was so abrupt that all three of them stopped just after they entered. Despite Zhen's having been raised in the self-proclaimed more culturally advanced city, Quy had always thought he was a little more superstitious than most, so he was surprised when Zhen stepped forward first.

"Well," he said.

Neither Quy nor the general moved.

"Let's get these children and get out of here," Zhen said. "I just want to be out of this place." He turned toward the staircase and started up it. "I want to be through with this."

"Agreed," Quy said, and followed him. When he heard the general's footsteps join him on the stairs, echoing, they all began to run.

He didn't think they had much time to spare. The palace was the prime target. It had to be. And it couldn't be as empty as it seemed. Lots of people had run out. But lots of people must have locked themselves in their rooms, as well.

He didn't know where the rulers were. In their throne room? In the royal quarters? On the field?

It didn't really matter.

The nursery was only on the second floor of five, but it was far to the back, as far from the portal as it could have been. Quy knew the way, though. He had spent most of his time since landing there.

The halls were empty, but, as he had suspected, a nurse was hiding in

the nursery with the children. The door had no lock. She looked as frightened as they did.

His older daughter Tung, three years old with his round face, ran toward him immediately. He picked her up, then walked over to Ching's cradle.

"Come here, Zhen," he said. He handed Tung to him, then reached into Ching's cradle. She began to cry.

The general picked up his son and nodded toward the door. Quy found that it was much harder to run while holding a child, but the halls were still empty.

They made it all the way to the atrium again before they saw anyone, and then they met exactly what Quy had been fearing. Four mutants filed in the entrance. Scouts.

They froze. Quy glanced around but saw nowhere to put the children. He looked back at the mutants. They slid out their blades.

Zhen tapped him on the shoulder. Quy turned to him and found Tung being pushed at him. He shifted Ching into his left arm, glad that she was small and he was fairly large. He grabbed Tung around her legs so she could hold onto his neck.

"Let me take this," Zhen said. "You go out the side."

Quy adjusted Tung and stared at him. Zhen lit his light weapons and stepped forward.

"You'd better hurry," he said.

Quy found that he couldn't run at all carrying both the children. He had to settle for walking very quickly so as not to drop one of them, and it was only then that he realized he and the general had left Zhen and were out in the courtyard

The courtyard was not empty either. Three horses were tied off to one side. And a larger group of mutants stood between them and the portal, at the boundary of the courtyard.

"This way," the general said, and headed for the horses. He mounted the grey one, pulling his son in front of him. Quy stopped next to one of the other two horses and glanced back at the mutants, who were advancing.

"Put Tung on my horse," the general said. He looked down at his son as Quy gently set Ching on the ground and lifted Tung onto the horse. "Hold on to her tightly, Nei Jen," he said.

Quy picked Ching up and struggled his way onto the horse's back. The general drew his sword and slashed the ropes tying the horses to a post. He grabbed the rope to the unmanned horse and kicked his forward, plowing his way through the line of mutants. Quy, the less experienced rider, followed in his wake.

As they galloped their horses out of the courtyard and past the entrance to the palace, Quy heard the victory cry of a mutant.

* * *

><p>Rah Cai Yue could feel the battle nearing. He could also hear it nearing, as he could begin to pick out individual sounds in the cacophonyâ€"he could hear almost everything in the nearest individual fight to him if he concentrated. But he didn't have much left to concentrate with, drained as he was by maintaining the portal.</p>

But he could listen to the sounds gently, and he was almost sure that he would know when the battle was close enough that he would have to open his eyes. Either way, Yen Saâ€"no, Yen Sa wasn't here anymore. Tieh Chen Yiâ€"but he hadn't heard him in a long time. Only Vendetta was left. But Vendetta would let him know.

After an indeterminable timeâ€"not that he was bad with time; it was just that creating a rift in the space-time continuum messed things up a little and gave him an overall woozy feelingâ€"he heard hooves running toward him. His first thought was the Centaurions, but the hoof-beats were much too quick and light.

He opened his eyes to see Li Wei Yong with two children in front of him on one horse, leading another, running toward him. Hua Quy Ling was on another horse with his baby, just behind. They galloped up to the front of the portal, and Cai Yue squinted at them. The general looked down at him, staring so long and hard that Cai Yue got the feeling he was searching for something in Cai Yue's face. Cai Yue nodded, and it must have been enough for the general, because he kicked his horse forward into the portal. Hua Quy Ling, clutching his baby protectively, didn't hesitate to follow.

Cai Yue looked out at the battle. It was still remarkably far away. Possibly it wouldn't even get to him before Kahn took over entirely. He wondered how he would know so that he could go through the portal before it happened. If Kei Sa had been there, their combined concentration could have sustained the portal even on the trip through. Without her, Cai Yue didn't want to risk it. If the flow of people through the portal ever stopped, he would jump right through, but just as he thought no one else was coming, someone else approached. At first it had been all civilians. A few Edenian soldiers had gone through. More recently, it was Kitsune guards, seeing that they could do no more and thinking of their own survival. Cai Yue didn't blame them. There was nothing to doâ€"nothing to do but keep the portal open.

He was watching another Kitsune guard approach, her two fur-wrapped braids slapping against her shoulders, when he saw a shadow in the distance shift.

He knew he wasn't thinking very clearly, but he knew that shadows weren't supposed to move on their own. His stomach started to twist.

"Vendetta!" he called.

The ninja slit a mutant's throat and jogged back to Cai Yue.

"Get out of here," he said.

Vendetta didn't answer.

"There's something out there," he said, pointing to the shadow.

Vendetta looked in its direction for a few seconds. Either he decided to believe Cai Yue, which Cai Yue didn't think was very likely, or he saw the shadow, too, because he jumped through the portal immediately.

Standing alone by his portal, Cai Yue knew he was tiring, because time kept shifting on him. He watched the shadow approach in jerks of motion that were too improbable to be anything but the effect of the portal. He reached over his shoulder to pull out his sword, his real sword because he was much too tired to manage a light sword, and found himself unable to do it. He was stuck in slow motion, but luckily for him, so was everything else. Nice of it to work that way.

Suddenly his sword was out in a burst of increased speed that brought the shadow up to his face. It had solid form, which he never would have guessed. It brought up a sword, as black as its clothes and skin, and Cai Yue swung his around to deflect it, stuck once again in slowed time, but his wrist was trembling, and his sword flew out of his hand. He watched it spiral, silver on the deepest purple, before time spurted forward again long enough for ice-cold metal to suddenly be in Cai Yue's stomach.

The portal closed, and real time started again for Rah Cai Yue. Four minutes passed.

* * *

><p>The Mandalorian ship was emptied, and a crowd of survivors had gathered to watch for their loved ones to come through the portal. Someâ€"the ones Yen Sa assumed had most of their closest family sitting next to themâ€"sat in the grass, staring at the portal calmly. Either they were very patient or in shock. Any time a loved one came through the portal, the family of that person came running to the front to cover him in kisses and tears. The Kitsune who comprised most of the recent escapees were met only with stoic greetings from the Kitsune already present.</p>

The two Edenian children, to Yen Sa's great relief, were snatched up almost immediately by their families. He guessed they had just gotten lost in the journey.

But he couldn't find anyone who knew whose baby he had rescued. He carried the bassinet around the crowd, but no one knew anything about her.

He heard horse's hooves and turn around to see the general and Hua Quy Ling on horseback, with all three of their children, and an extra horse. The queen rushed forward to greet them.

He approached a young-looking Mandalorian woman he thought he recognized from the Mandalorian palace a long time ago.

"Hello," he said.

She looked up at him.

"I was wondering if perhaps this was your child." He lowered the bassinet so that she could look in. She didn't.

"Don't you know who I am?" she said. Without waiting for his reply, she continued, "I am Hsu Lin. You would know if I had a baby."

Who?

"Besides," she said. "I am not even married."

Well, he couldn't imagine why not. He turned away and started walking back to the other side of the crowd. He approached the queen. She was arguing with her husband over his having taken the time to rescue the horses. He claimed that they needed them to get away from some mutants. She pointed out that he didn't need the third one.

Yen Sa shook his head and sat down. He adjusted the baby's blankets and felt something hard underneath them. It was a book. The story of Mulan. He smiled down at her.

He raised it up and looked at the queen. The spread of such feminist literature among the Mandalorians was most likely her influence after all. It might make her smile for a few seconds, which would be a few seconds more than she had since the disaster on Coruscant.

Something silver glinted in the corner of his eye, and he glanced over quickly to see a sword fly out of the portal. It landed hilt first and slid on the slick grass, stopping just in front of the queen's feet.

It was Rah Cai Yue's sword.

The queen was sobbing by the time the portal closed, two seconds later.

It was over.

Yen Sa looked around. He saw about a hundred Edenians, about twenty of whom were Kitsune. There were also fifty or so Mandalorians.

Five honor guard, including himself. Li Yuen Ming, Li Wei Yong, Hua Quy Ling, Vendetta, and Yen Sa.

So that was it. It was the second time Yen Sa's life had been reset. The first had been a tragedy for only two people—the slain—and had allowed him to reach a much better place. The second was a tragedy for two entire planets. His challenge was to let it take him to yet another better place.

Yen Sa put the story of Mulan back in the bassinet. 'Mulan' would be a nice name for the girl.

* * *

><p>The ship that Braeden Leer was on smelled like vomit, and the engine clanked irregularly. He sat in a sticky seat, trying to ignore the engine noises, and stared at the glowing stone he held in his hand, thinking of the luck of the man who had given it to him to have

left when he did.<p>

Had the ship's pilots been clean and young, he wouldn't have trusted it. But its pilots resembled the ship, and so he assumed that they also knew it well--its limitations as well as its capabilities. And they claimed their ship would take them all the way to the Unknown Regions without a single problem.

They were pirates, of course, running to escape the change of government just as Braeden was. They'd had a niche in the system of the Old Republic, one of those little nuances in the balance that could never be completely wiped out or the whole system would collapse.

The whole system had collapsed now, and new one had risen in its place. A system with zero tolerance for much of anything except following its orders, let alone piracy.

It had happened almost immediately after the Mandalorians left. Palpatine had declared the Republic an Empire, and himself Emperor, proving that the bad vibes Braeden had always gotten off of Palpatine weren't just creepy politician vibes after all. It was a good disguise for an evil man.

What was strangest about everything was the lack of chaos. The overthrow--one of the system rather than the leader--had occurred almost overnight. The next morning, those not in favor were struggling to try to figure out what they should do about it, many of them struggling to take it in after finding themselves suddenly in jail cells.

Tascilo was probably doing something stupid, taking all his loyal men to death along with him.

Braeden had preferred to leave. It had made his galaxy into a place he liked even less, which he hadn't really thought possible. His teachers on Calyaar had always said there wasn't a bottom to hit--if you went low, you could always go lower.

The Republic had gone lower before it fell. There wasn't much that hadn't been corrupted--military, senate, leader, Jedi even. Anakin Skywalker, who had been the most controversial Jedi since Braeden Leer, had surpassed Braeden when he had killed the leader of the Mandalorian Supercommandoes and proceeded to join Emperor Palpatine as some sort of second-in-command. Braeden didn't think the Jedi Council itself had actually been corrupt, but it didn't raise his opinion of them any.

Palpatine had been scheming for years. He had his followers stationed in all the positions that mattered, and the change in government had meant different titles and a new rulebook and not much else at the center. The ripples were beginning to distort things beyond belief.

So Braeden was leaving. He hoped to find a civilization worth existing in.

He tossed the glowing crystal--the sunstone--into the air, thinking that the Mandalorian civilization hadn't seemed quite as bad as the Republic. It was almost a pity they didn't actually exist in his

galaxy's Unknown Regions, and he didn't know how to get to their planet.

He tossed the stone again, and it stopped glowing.

He forgot to catch it.

He should have known. Home was not always a haven. He knew that as well as anyone.

And luck? There was no such thing as luck.

He hoped, at the very least, that the Mandalorians found someplace to settle, to rebuild. He doubted that he ever would.

39. Postlude: Dusk

The Queen's Honor Guard
>by Nyohah<p>

Postlude
>Dusk
>1 Day Before MK1<p>

* * *

><p>Li Yuen Ming rode a sleek, dark brown horse to a little enclave of the village cemetery. As small a town as Yanxubin was, it had its own memorial, the Mandalorian village's humble remembrance to a world and people long since lost. It consisted solely of a cherry blossom tree and a glass case on a stone bench. Every so often the glass would break, and Yen Sa would order another one.<p>

The glass case kept Rah Cai Yue's sword from rusting.

Ming approached it, watching her reflection blurred in the weathered surface. She was still dressed in her house clothes, a simple, sturdy white dress. She had left her house so rarely in the past years that she didn't have much besides house clothes left. Her hair was as long and black as ever, tied in a braid, so that when she looked at her distorted reflection she looked to herself like the child she had been when the monument was constructed. The glass didn't reflect the signs of age in her face.

The cherry blossom tree was a little stunted, and its flowers wilted.

Ming fought back tears. She knelt by the case, and before she could begin to feel too foolish, began to speak softly.

"I'm sorry I haven't ever come here, Cai Yue," she said. "I don't think I've been myself since we found out Mandalore was gone. It's funny, because I thought I was back to myself years ago. But I've never come here, and I've never noticed how awful your tree looks.

"You saved a lot of people, Cai Yue. The Edenians left for South America immediately, afterward, though. You know how they prefer to live there rather than China like us. Climate. We had quite a time

burying the ship without them, though. We wondered at the time about how determined Vendetta was to have it done his way. Once it became the Lin Kuei headquarters, it made a lot more sense.

"Yes, that's right. Vendetta restarted the Lin Kuei. Isn't it terrible? He had a surprising amount of support. And then even some of the men who didn't support it joined. Hua Quy Ling was most surprising of all. Everything really did hit him hard. And I don't think he knew what to do with himself. It was something familiar, something he knew he was good at, in a completely unfamiliar place, in completely unfamiliar circumstances.

"I helped to raise his daughters. They were sweet, and beautiful, but they were taken away. People never really got over everything that happened with the war, and they blamed the Honor Guard for it. There were Mandalorian prophecy-hunters roaming China, historians who came to Earth before the rest of us, and one of them found Tung and Ching. None of the villagers showed any sympathy for Quy, taking the girls away from him to give to this stranger. I haven't seen them since.

"I have another child, though. A son. His name is Yuan, and he was born five years after Mandalore was destroyed. Nine years younger thanâ€" She faltered, and in the silence her cheeks began to flush from embarrassment. But no one was around, so what did it matter if she was talking to a sword?

"I really thought that having Yuan woke me up again. There was a time when he was so sick he almost died, and I sank back again, but when he got better, I thought I was even better than before. I guess I was wrong, though. My eyes were open again, but only to Yuan. I didn't even notice about your tree. And I think I may have ignored Nei Jen.

"He's a Lin Kuei now, too. Vendetta takes one son from every family. It's almost as though he's emperor. Or, he'd like to think he is. Luckily, he's not the only power in our town. Yen Sa knew exactly what to do to continue living. He really is an electronics wizard. He got into one of the big companies, and now I think he spends more time in Japan than he does at home. And he's very rich. If someone here isn't Lin Kuei, most likely they work for Yen Sa. And his daughter Mulan is wonderful, too. She's one of Yuan's best friends.

"So if you want to see the head figures of Yanxubin, you look for Vendetta or Yen Sa. If you want to find the lowest, you look for me or Wei Yong. Remember how I said the Honor Guard are blamed for the war? We're blamed even more, and we're hated even more. Wei Yong has trouble even getting people to work in his stablesâ€"he breeds horses. I think they're all descended from the three he rescued from Edenia." She sighed.

"It's all my fault, too, you know. Poor Wei Yong, and Quy Ling, having to put up with everything that I've caused. Vendetta and Yen Sa have avoided it because they made our survival possible. And I'm the only one who deserves that shame. I've been terrible. I don't know that it's possible to be any colder than I was. I was cold to even Nei Jen, Cai Yue. And now he's gone off on to fight in the Mortal Kombat tournament as part of an assassination mission, and I'm terrified that he's not going to come back. I'm awake now, but if he

doesn't come back, then I'll always have been cold to him."

She sniffed, and wrapped her arms around herself for warmth.

"Kei Sa knew what she was talking about. I wish I had known to listen."

She stood, and looked again at the cherry blossom tree. "I'll plant a better one--I'll take care of it, and it will be better."

The sun set over Yanxubin, China, the Final Coast.

End
file.